

EDUCATION

'A very dicey situation.' Lakota school board emails show rift on superintendent complaint



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Key Points

Lakota school board members were informed of the complaints against Miller by their attorneys on Thursday, Aug. 18, according to emails obtained by The Enquirer.

The board did not announce anything about an investigation, by police or otherwise, until Monday, Sept. 12.

Superintendent Matt Miller has not been charged with any crimes. He says the complaints are false and he remains serving in his full capacity as superintendent.

The Lakota school board was aware of a complaint against district superintendent Matt Miller for nearly a month before publicly announcing an investigation in mid-September. During those weeks before the announcement, records obtained by The Enquirer show board members disagreed on how to address a complaint against the district's leader.

Lakota superintendent investigation: Here's what we know

The Butler County Sheriff's Office conducted an investigation into Miller after receiving a complaint against him in August and concluded they didn't have probable cause to bring criminal charges. Miller has since claimed he is the target of character assassination and that all allegations made against him are false.

Below is a brief timeline of what's happened since the police complaint was filed:

Aug. 8 – Vanessa Wells, a Lakota parent who unsuccessfully ran for school board last year, filed a complaint against Miller with the sheriff's office.

Aug. 17 – Detectives reviewed the case and determined there was no cause to file charges against Miller "at this time," according to police documents.

Aug. 18 – District attorneys informed the school board of the allegations. The board concluded at an executive session that day that since a sheriff's investigation had begun, it was better to get the police report before taking any action, according to an email from board member Isaac Adi to board member Darbi Boddy.

Sept. 9 – The school board received a notice from the sheriff's office that there was no probable cause that Miller committed a crime.

Sept. 12 – Board president Lynda O'Connor announced the district was investigating Miller.

Sept. 28 – The board unanimously approved a contract with a New York City-based law firm with a Cincinnati office to further investigate Miller.

Miller, 50, heads the second-largest district in southwest Ohio and the eighth-largest school system in the state, serving more than 16,000 students in 20 schools in Butler County. Despite a petition with more than 550 signatures asking for Miller to be placed on administrative leave while the investigation plays out, Miller remains acting in his full capacity as superintendent.

The allegations "lack merit and proof," Miller read in a statement at the last school board meeting on Sept. 28. He said he is cooperating with the district's investigation, just as he cooperated with the sheriff's investigation.

What are the complaints against Lakota superintendent Matt Miller?

Emails among the board members from Aug. 24 and 25 were given to The Enquirer after the news organization filed an Ohio Open Records request. Boddy, who has repeatedly voiced displeasure with Miller and attacked his character during the year she's been on the school board, emailed each of her colleagues individually asking for their support in calling an emergency board meeting on Aug. 24.

At that proposed meeting, Boddy wrote, she wanted the board to vote on whether to suspend Miller pending the investigation and conduct a "mental competence examination" of Miller.

Boddy also wanted to send a letter to Miller, on behalf of the board, listing the claims made against him and asking him for a written response to those claims within five business days.

In Boddy's resolution, which has not yet been presented at a Lakota school board meeting, Boddy included a draft letter to Miller that listed the following claims, which mirrored the complaint filed with the sheriff's office:

Miller's ex-wife engaged in sexual conduct with other men with Miler's knowledge and consent while he "remotely viewed" the interactions.

Miller and his ex-wife have maintained and exchanged "prurient photographs of naked children."

If those allegations are true, Boddy wrote, Miller may have violated sections of his superintendent contract regarding his obligation to act with "the highest standards or personal conduct" and to "operate with integrity."

"I completely disagree with the resolution you drafted," Lakota school board president Lynda O'Connor wrote back to Boddy. "There is no concrete evidence of misconduct by Superintendent Miller, or that he presents a threat to students or staff."

O'Connor also wrote that Boddy should "be careful with putting these allegations in writing."

Board wary of acting on hearsay, which could end with 'destroying our school district'

When Boddy approached the other board members about an emergency meeting on Aug. 24, her colleagues disagreed that the investigation demanded an urgent response on the board's behalf. Unlike Boddy, the other board members wrote they were wary of the claims for several reasons:

The complaint presented to the board, and to law enforcement, was from a third party.

The allegations relied on Miller's ex-wife's story.

The complaint mentioned incidents that occurred several years ago and are only now coming to light.

O'Connor and other board members said they had already created a plan of action during an executive session two days prior to Boddy's email.

"I don't believe an emergency meeting is appropriate or necessary currently," board member Kelley Casper wrote in response to Boddy. "The board developed a plan on Monday ... and I have not heard of anything changing that would cause us to abandon that plan."

Boddy replied, writing that she disagreed with the board's plan.

"Our clear duty is to oversee the Superintendent, regardless of what law enforcement does or does not do. They are charged with determining if probable cause for a crime exists. We are charged with overseeing employment in the best interest of the children. Punting to law enforcement is shirking our duty," Boddy wrote.

Board member Julie Shaffer wrote to Boddy that without additional details, "another session would not be productive."

Adi said the district is "at a very dicey situation right now."

"I don't know what the truth is right now," Adi wrote via email to Boddy. "At this time if we are not careful but only depend on hearsay and not the truth we will be making a great mistake."

"Also if this is a made up story, putting Matt on Administrative leave based on false allegations will end up destroying our school district and him and his career," Adi wrote. "Let's get the truth before we act."

In replies to her colleagues, Boddy maintained that the board's responsibility extends beyond whether the police might charge Miller.

"To simply do nothing strikes me as a colossal mistake," Boddy wrote to O'Connor.

None of the emails among the board members indicates they knew any details of the sheriff's investigation that had been closed about a week before the email flurry – or that sheriff's and prosecutor's officials decided there wasn't enough probable cause to charge Miller "at this time."

Sheriff's detectives spoke to Miller's ex-wife, Barbara Breckenridge, who repeated the claim made by the third party that Miller would send her nude photos of kids. But an investigative report notes that Brackenridge was unable to provide any proof of those photos and that she did not have the same phone or account as she did at the time when she said photos were allegedly sent.

A few days later, the detectives interviewed Miller, who initially denied all of the claims. But, according to police records, Miller did say that when it came to sexual encounters, he and his ex-wife "would arrange and participate in these activities but there were never any minors involved." The investigative report also states Miller said that he and his ex-wife would "role-

play” and engage in “pillow talk,” which on one occasion included a discussion of drugging, molesting and recording three kids.

Breckenridge told detectives that she had told the couple's marriage counselor that Miller asked her to act on the pillow talk discussion. But the marriage counselor told detectives that she never heard that from Breckenridge – and that she would have reported it "because she is a mandated reporter."