



BOARD OF EDUCATION  
SPECIAL MEETING  
2309 TULARE STREET  
BOARD ROOM, 2<sup>nd</sup> FLOOR  
FRESNO, CA 93721  
[board.fresnounified.org](http://board.fresnounified.org)

## **MINUTES – BOARD OF EDUCATION SPECIAL MEETING**

**Fresno, California**

**April 03, 2024**

Fresno Unified School District, 2309 Tulare Street, Fresno, CA 93722.

At a special meeting of the Board of Education of Fresno Unified School District, held on April 03, 2024, there were present Board Members Cazares, Islas, Jonasson Rosas, Levine, Thomas, Board Clerk Davis, and Board President Wittrup. Superintendent Robert G. Nelson, Ed.D. was away, attending the Battelle for Kids Urban District Cohort.

Board President Wittrup CONVENED the meeting at 5:00 p.m.

### **PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

Patrick Jensen led the Flag Salute.

For the record, Board Member Cazares motioned to table agenda item 1.a., Superintendent Interviews pending further Board deliberation. Board Member Thomas seconded the motion.

For the record, Board Member Levine requested to amend the motion to allow for the scheduled internal interviews to take place and commit to an external comprehensive process as well.

For the record, Board President requested feedback of legal counsel Bryan Martin. Mr. Martin confirmed Member Levine's request for an amendment to the motion to stand if approved by Member Cazares.

For the record, Board Member Cazares thanked member Levine for his request to amend the motion and expressed understanding of his position. Board Member Cazares shared that to make the process cleaner and more transparent the Board should take a step back and start fresh from the beginning including additional community input before moving forward with any interviews. Member Cazares apologized and stated she would rather move forward with the motion as originally proposed.

For the record, Board Member Thomas revoked her second and asked to hear from other Trustees.

For the record, legal counsel Bryan Martin called a point of order, and provided clarity that a second does not mean agreement with the motion, but that the second allows the board to discuss the motion.

For the record, Board Member Thomas confirmed she would like an opportunity to hear from fellow Board Members.

For the record, Board Members had comments/questions pertaining to the motion. A summary is as follows:

**Member Jonasson Rosas** commented there are strong feelings from the community with people invested in the search for the superintendent in support of Fresno Unified. Member Jonasson Rosas commented that she would like to hear from the community and believes it is appropriate for the Board to take a step back, and before moving forward reevaluate and have a very frank and open discussion in closed session. Member Jonasson Rosas supported the motion as stated by Board Member Cazares.

**Member Islas** pointed out a Board majority vote is what brought the Board here today. Commented that she would like to honor and respect the time of those in attendance as well as the candidates who are ready and planning to interview. Commented that she has heard the community's concern of the lack of an opportunity to expand beyond the internal candidates; but feels there is an opportunity to honor the work that has brought the district to this point and then to move forward in a way that is responding to the community. Board Member Islas did not support the motion as stated by Board Member Cazares.

**Clerk Davis** referenced a statement provided at the last board meeting regarding a board update on the superintendent search after the completion of community meetings and an additional update regarding the next phase of the search which will be an interview of internal applicants. Clerk Davis commented that we are at the next phase and directed Leadership Associates to do three things: listen to the community, gather a working description based on what the community asked, and to do the internal interviews. Clerk Davis was not sure how information got out to the community that a final vote would happen tonight.

Clerk Davis commented that this is her third superintendent search, and the district has always had community members on the search team, always had trustees suggest a person from their community or from their region, which would then prevent any closed session and provides the opportunity to do everything openly in the public. Clerk Davis supported the motion as stated by Board Member Cazares.

**Member Thomas** commented this has spun out of control and some comments made were not true. It is unfair to the people that have prepared for this next step in their lives, have worked their lives for this district, have given time to the district, have incurred racism in this district towards them and their families and this includes some Board members as well, they have been threatened, jobs have been threatened, there are things happening that people do not see and it is for that reason and the protection of the Board and staff that Member Thomas recommends taking a step back; however, that does not change my mind about whether or not we should do internal first.

On a motion by Board Member Cazares, seconded by Board Member Thomas, the Board approved to table agenda item 1.a., Superintendent Interviews pending further Board deliberation by a roll call vote of 5-2-0-0, as follows: AYES: Cazares, Jonasson Rosas, Thomas, Clerk Davis, and Board President Wittrup. NOES: Board Members Islas and Levine.

### **OPPORTUNITY for Public Comment on Closed Session Items**

For the record, the Board received thirty (30) requests to address the Board on Closed Session items. A summary is as follows:

1. Debbie Darden: Shared reasons why she supports opening the superintendent search to external candidates.
2. Priscilla Presto: Spoke on the difference between hearing and listening, commented on leadership and accountability, and in support of opening the superintendent search to external candidates.
3. Drew Phelps: Shared of move from Tulare to Fresno and looking forward to children attending Fresno Unified. Spoke in support of a transparent process and opening the superintendent search to the most exhaustive process possible.
4. Christina Soto: Expressed offense that the Board ignored community feedback from listening sessions. Commented that it does not make sense to handicap the district by limiting the search to internal candidates. Shared that community comments of wanting someone from the valley did not necessarily mean an internal candidate.
5. Anthony Haddad: Commented it is incumbent of the Board as representatives of the community to ensure this process is one of the utmost integrity, transparency, and inclusion.
6. Brian Phelps: Commented that Fresno Unified should strive to be best in education and it starts with this vital role, someone who has a unique perspective on how to lead the district. Spoke in support of opening the superintendent search to external candidates.
7. Miguel Arias: Provided examples of search processes of other agencies and spoke in support of opening the superintendent search to external candidates.
8. Darius Assemi: Spoke in support of opening the superintendent search to external candidates and requested that the Board hire a new search firm.
9. Darlene Lee: Ceded time to Annarita Howell.
10. Annarita Howell: Expressed concerns pertaining to the decision to pause interviews.
11. Cher Vang: Expressed respect for the Board's leadership and decision to find the best candidate for the district, feels Fresno Unified has strong candidates within the district and it is not necessary to look outside particularly as the district is facing budget reductions. Requested the Board to make sure their decision is not based on a political or personal agenda which could incite racial tension.

12. Kao Xiong: Commented on concerns of cultural insensitivity and racial bias within the superintendent search and the impact of those on the Hmong community. Referenced alleged comments made against the deputy superintendent and a pursuit of legal action.
13. Va Her: Applauded the Board for coming to a consensus. Asked to clarify a news article that spoke of racism within the superintendent search whether intentional or unintentional and provided examples of statements made.
14. Geri Yang-Johnson: Commented on having attended the community listening sessions and hearing residents, parents, students, and staff say they felt the district had strong capable and confident internal candidates to lead the school district. Commented the district has internal leaders with decades of commitment and expertise and resolute determination to give every child in the district access to the best possible education.
15. John Thao: Shared a personal experience of facing racism related to the search for a superintendent. Referenced the demographics of the district and the district's minority rate and requested the Board to hire someone who has knowledge about communities with diverse needs. Called upon the Board to hold individuals showing signs of racism accountable.
16. Yunah Vang: Commented on students having to address issues normally trusted to adults and Trustees showing the opposite of what Fresno Unified represents. Commented that it seems skin color overlooks a person's credentials and racism is deep rooted in the process of choosing a district superintendent.
17. Kimberly Vang: Asked if concern was really to broaden the search for the best candidate to lead Fresno Unified, or not wanting a person of color to represent the district.
18. Cheng Yang: Spoke of students sharing their concern that the Board did not open interviews to external candidates from the beginning; but, now with all internal candidates from minorities, they decide to pause the process and start again.
19. Shyanne Xiong: Spoke in support of the Hmong Dual Immersion program. Requested the Board to hire a superintendent who looks like the students in Fresno Unified, who speaks more than one language and will support the language programs.
20. Thao Yang: Spoke of harmful stereotypes and division that has been part of the conversation.
21. Austin Yang: Spoke on behalf of district employees and children of a potential threat on first amendment rights.
22. Marisa Rodriguez: Commented the concern to branch the process to include external candidates should not be a discussion limited to race. Whomever the best candidate is, no matter race or ethnicity, they should be able to stand against a nationwide search. Process must be transparent to gain the trust of the community.
23. Paul Forte, Jr.: Talked of fairness and consistency in the superintendent search and commented at this point cannot see anything but impropriety.

24. Sade Williams: Commented on concerns of misrepresentation of the family voice within the superintendent search process.
25. Terri Kimber-Edwards: Acknowledged the student voice in the room. Questioned if concern is genuinely about students. Asked what process is in place within the superintendent search for parent input, what is the process to select parents, and if former employees will participate. Asked if it is politics as usual. Suggested a transparent, fair, and equitable process involving parents, students, employees, and constituents from the community.
26. Daniel Mendoza: Was not present when called.
27. Manual Bonilla: Thanked individuals of the community for sharing their voice. Thanked the Board for their decision to broaden the search for a new superintendent and commented that it came after the public forced the issue. Hopes the step to broaden the search will help build trust. Challenged the Board to provide the community an opportunity to hear from each finalist about their vision for the district before coming to a final decision.
28. Stacy Williams: Commented that no one is saying a member of the Hmong community cannot be superintendent. Made accusations of people using the Hmong community as a propaganda tool.
29. Sandra Celedon: Commented that the most significant work of the Board and the only employee the Board hires is the superintendent. Expressed disappointment in how the Board fumbled the process. Commented that due to the Board's actions and failure to execute the Board's primary job it demonstrates a lack of Board leadership and that the Board is not capable of leading the district. Urged the district to step back and flesh out a process from start to finish.
30. Gloria Hernandez: Commented that leaking of information should have never happened. Expressed the need for the Board to go nationwide and create a process where those top candidates come back to the community to answer questions. Commented that the same issues/questions come up over and over again without resolution.
31. Chris Vang: Commented on alleged comments of nepotism made against the Deputy Superintendent. Commented it is essential to scrutinize interconnected relationships and affiliations with the media and governing officials as their collective action may contribute to a culture of favoritism. Commented it is incumbent upon us to ensure transparency, accountability, and adherence to legal standards in all facets of government.

Board President Wittrup ADJOURNED the meeting to Closed Session at 4:36 p.m.

Board President Wittrup RECONVENED the meeting to Open Session at 7:20 p.m.

### **Reporting Out of Closed Session**

For the record, there was no official action taken to report.

For the record, Board President Wittrup read the following: The Board has heard the community and values the input it has received, and the Board will use this input to reevaluate the path forward in the search for the district's next superintendent.

### **OPPORTUNITY FOR UNSCHEDULED ORAL COMMUNICATIONS**

For the record, the Board received one (1) request to address the Board during Unscheduled Oral Communications. The individual's name with a summary of topic is as follows:

1. James Barr: Thanked the Board for allowing children and members of the public to speak early in the evening and requested the Board to do so at future meetings.

### **D. ADJOURNMENT**

Board President Wittrup ADJOURNED the workshop at 7:21 p.m.