

BOARD RETREAT

I was naïve to think that once the WEDJ Board was armed with knowledge of the limitations of the Qualitative Site Review, and an understanding that substantial change takes time – that they would naturally rally in support for my leadership. This was not the case.

Initially, I was very encouraged to see that the WEDJ Board of Trustees had decided to hold a retreat to work on establishing a school vision with clear goals for moving forward. It was also an opportunity for team building, as we had three new Board members: Tammy Daub, Jeri Epstein and Cindy Gertz, who hosted the retreat at her home. Idea School principal, Justin Rydstrom, and our single parent representative, Lauren Szewczyk, also attended the daylong meeting led by Mr. Goldman. Mr. Carnes, a friend of Goldman's, was unable to attend the retreat, and while I had only met him twice, I felt his knowledge of technology could have been a tremendous asset on the Board team. While Mr. Carter and I had recommended names for the second parent representative (Tony Broomfield and Mohammed Kamara), we were still short this representative at the retreat.

When we were down to three Board members in 2013, I recommended to Goldman that we ask Tony Upson from Howard University to consider being on the WEDJ Board. I asked Tony if he might be interested; he was delighted at the prospect and submitted his resume to the nominations committee. Tony was a highly respected African American leader in the DC urban schools network, had worked at Harvard and was named as the 2014 Legacy Award winner and inducted to the Washington DC Hall of Fame. One parent member on our Board knew of Tony from her previous school; she indicated at the time that she would be very supportive of his nomination to the WEDJ Board. Goldman, however, did not move on the nomination, and preceded to hire *Charter Board Partners* (CBP), who added three new Caucasian members to the Trustee team with one remaining African American parent representative, Jeanette Staton, who left the school and resigned the day before Count Day in October 2013. My co-leader, John Manahan, had recommended CBP to help the school vet Board candidates. He was concerned that for months we did not have enough Board members. When some representatives from CBPs came to the first Board meeting, I remember having a conversation about needing a broad range of skill sets to help us move forward. While the consultant group was warm to the idea of ensuring we had a lawyer, a real estate expert and people who could fund raise, they seemed reluctant to consider the possibility of university candidates. The idea of not having experts in education as part of the Board troubled me, but I continued to promote Tony's

application. I recall contacting my mentor, Alexandra Pardo, about the make-up of the Board. I had mentioned to her and frequently to John Goldman how much I wanted Tony to be part of this leadership group. To this day no one from the Board has been in touch with Tony Upson to thank him for his interest in WEDJ, and either accept, nor officially deny his request to be part of the Board.

Apart from having little influence on Board membership, I was very enthusiastic about the retreat as I was confident to take a lead role in defining the vision with the Board. I was eager to set the agenda with John Goldman. I offered to meet in advance to plan the day out, but he said he was too busy. I felt the retreat should address the data gathered in the TenSquare audit, but each time I asked if their report was ready for reading, Goldman told me it would not be available in advance of the retreat. I was sent the agenda, and could see in advance that my voice would be delegated to a Q & A session. I had prepared a comprehensive PowerPoint presentation to share during my School Report on the agenda, but time was not afforded for me to address the group. I gave Goldman copies to distribute to the Board, but I did not receive any responses. Goldman had filled in the plan for the day with a DCPCSB representative who explained details about how the Performance Management Framework (PMF) rankings worked.

Goldman also asked Charter Board Partners (CBP) to lead the vision and goal setting session. I remember being asked about my leadership goals. While we were all responsible for specific goals for the school as outlined in the charter, I felt my main focus was to improve the critical mass of exceptional teaching staff. By doing so, we would be more effective at improving learning conditions for our students, that would ultimately lead to increased standardized test scores (DC-CAS), attendance, and re-enrollment. As a school leader, I also told my Board that I was committed to life-long learning. There was no secret formula for great charters. By indicating I that I was committed to lifelong learning, I was open to improvement and change to make a better school. Goldman disagreed with me publicly and indicated his goal was to “win.” Thoughts of Charlie Sheen’s rants filled my head, but I respectfully listened. At this point the mood was awkward. Everyone, including the facilitator, lingered in what seemed like an endless pause. In the end, Goldman controlled the final list of goals. Coming off a scare from his own school being threatened with closure, the Board was fueled with his concerns that WEDJ was in trouble and may be at risk, too.

Ensuring that the school was prepared for the Ten-Year Review represented the most urgent goal for the Board and the school. The poor Qualitative Site Review echoed how the school was not meeting the mandate of its’ outdated charter would prove to be problematic for WEDJ. For instance, it did not make sense having an unrealistic goal of 100% proficiency on the annual testing, when the actual results ranged between 43% to 51% proficiency between 2012 and 2014. Not only was Goldman at the helm, as Executive Director, when lower scores prevailed, he later, in his Chairman of the Board role, failed to recognize the important need to revisit these original goals to update them. It is doubtful if any schools in Tier 1 would be held to absolute standards that indicated “all” students would be proficient in reading

and mathematics. The standards, when first written, listed idealistic targets, but such outdated options should have been tagged much earlier by the DCPCSB in terms of oversight, and when urged to make these changes in a timely manner, the Board governance, in my opinion, let the school down in a significant way. This should have been an important discussion during our retreat. Given the Ten-Year Review was on our critical path, we needed to do something to address the fact that the QSR and Ten Year Review team members would be looking for evidence that was not there.

No one addressed the updating of the WEDJ charter and goals during the retreat. It would have been necessary to revise the charter in order to meet this goal and two of the other goals that the Charter Board Partners facilitator helped the group identify, namely, that the school complete the Ten Year Review and secure renewal of our charter and, that the overall school performance on the PMF to 40 or higher as recommended by the Public Charter School Board. To this list of goals, the Board also agreed to set the bar low in my opinion, for fundraising targets indicating they would aim for \$15,000.

Cindy Gertz, the Chair of the Finance Committee, was interested in hiring a grant writer and professional fundraiser. When Szewczyk volunteered to write grants, or fundraise at an earlier Board meeting, I recall Goldman directing her away from 'hands-on' work. He believed the school should hire 'development' or fundraising personnel, contributing to the extensive numbers of operational, non-teaching staff. At no time during the retreat did Gertz come up with any other strategy other than out-sourcing the fundraising tasks. In addition to accessing the work of volunteer grant writers from the community (Board, staff, and local experts), I felt that given the sensitivity of using public funds, that we might consider hiring a fundraiser with a percentage cap built into a commission, rather than investing in a salary and benefits without any guarantees. During my time at WEDJ, the Board never approached the community or families formally to raise funds for the school. We did secure a grant for \$150,000 for improved science and arts programming, as well as a grant for the PK playground (\$25,000). Even when my family donated \$15,000 toward the playground, in addition to close to \$8000 to support student leadership development, there was no response from the WEDJ Board of Trustees for such good will.

At one point in the retreat, I was asked to leave the room when the Board went into a closed session. I waited in the kitchen where I could see a hard copy of the TenSquare report on the table. I assumed this was Cindy's copy, as it was her home. I did not read the report, assuming I would be emailed the document for review. When I was permitted to return to the meeting, I discovered that Jeri Epstein had left the retreat early. Jeri later informed me that the closed session was focused on questioning my leadership. Jeri resigned from the Board a few days later. She informed me that she did not want to be part of a Board that was not supporting the school leader. This was a significant loss to the school as Jeri had extensive experience in education, fundraising, and was willing to volunteer her time to help the school improve. In hindsight, it was becoming clearer that this might be the beginning of the end for me at WEDJ.