

HERE COMES THE NEW BOSS

4J wrestles with how to select its next superintendent

At a June 25 board meeting, 4J Superintendent Sheldon Berman asked the school board to release him from his contract a year early, stunning many in the room. According to parent and private math tutor Gina Graham, “The whole room went silent. Everyone just looked at each other.”

Graham attended the meeting and the preceding work session to express her dissatisfaction with the way Berman and the Eugene 4J School District brought in a new math curriculum, College Preparatory Mathematics (CPM), without consulting teachers or following proper procedure. The math program is an example of what some parents feel is the closed-off way in which Berman has pushed through district-wide decisions, such as switching all 4J high schools to a trimester system.

The school board will convene for a preliminary discussion of superintendent hiring strategies on Aug. 21. Until then, it’s unclear whether the district will follow the same hiring procedure as last time — conducting a national search using a private executive search consultant — or, as some parents have suggested, look locally for the people who know Eugene schools best.

When 4J hired Berman during the 2010-2011 school year, the school board appointed a citizen search committee of 20 members with the purpose of providing “input and assistance during the superintendent search process,” according to 4J’s website. Members of this committee included Anne Marie Levis, a current 4J board member and president of marketing firm Funk/Levis & Associates; Sabrina Parsons, chief executive officer of Palo Alto Software; and Tad Shannon, president of the Eugene Education Association.

“We tried to involve staff and community members and others so that we had a broad group of people looking at the criteria developed through a community input process,” says Beth Gerot, a 4J board member who served on the 2010-2011 superintendent search committee. “Whether we go through that process this time is not a decision that we have made, but I know we will consider it.”

The search committee held no power to actually select superintendent candidates; rather, the committee advised a school board-selected executive search consultant, Ray & Associates, Inc., which ultimately selected the list of finalists to present to the school board. Ray & Associates, Inc., based in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, specializes in educational executive leadership searches, and 4J paid the firm \$15,332 to conduct its superintendent search.

The consultant firm recommended three candidates: Darlene Schottle of Montana, Michael Munoz of Iowa and Sheldon Berman of Kentucky. On March 16, 2011, the school board selected Berman, who served as 4J’s superintendent for three years before he announced the 2014-2015 school year as his last.

This announcement came after a heated work session and meeting in which Graham, other parents and math teachers weighed in on CPM, which is costing the district \$428,570 in bond funds.

According to Graham and other parents in 4J, the way the Eugene School District introduced the curriculum did not follow the normal process of implementing curricula, and parents say they can’t get a straight answer from the district regarding who chose the curriculum and why the district didn’t seek more parent and teacher input.

In a letter read by Graham and signed by five Sheldon High School math teachers, the teachers wrote that “there was absolutely nothing organic about the process with which we ended up with this curriculum. Not once were high school teachers offered an opportunity to examine what other publishers had to offer ... we implore the school board to not formally adopt the CPM math program.”

Parent Lisa Christon says she doesn’t understand why the district still can’t answer the questions of who implemented the curriculum and why so much money was spent on a curriculum not yet officially adopted. Berman told her via email in 2012 that the curriculum would be paid for by an anonymous donor, which turned out to be Kendall Toyota.

By 2014, the district had spent \$565,404 on CPM, with Kendall covering only \$96,000 of the cost. The rest of the cost came out of 4J’s general and bond funds.

“I’m surprised at how the district handles these things in such a way that invites suspicion and mistrust,” Christon says.

Berman will spend the upcoming school year as superintendent of 4J before he departs without an evaluation of his performance, and during that time the school board will look for a replacement. Mary Walston, current 4J board chair, says the board will discuss the schedule and particulars of the search at a board retreat on Aug. 21.

“It’s very early in the process,” Walston says of the hunt for a new superintendent. “At our retreat we’ll discuss if we’ll have community input, if we’ll go with a national search firm, if we’ll try to do it more regionally or locally.”

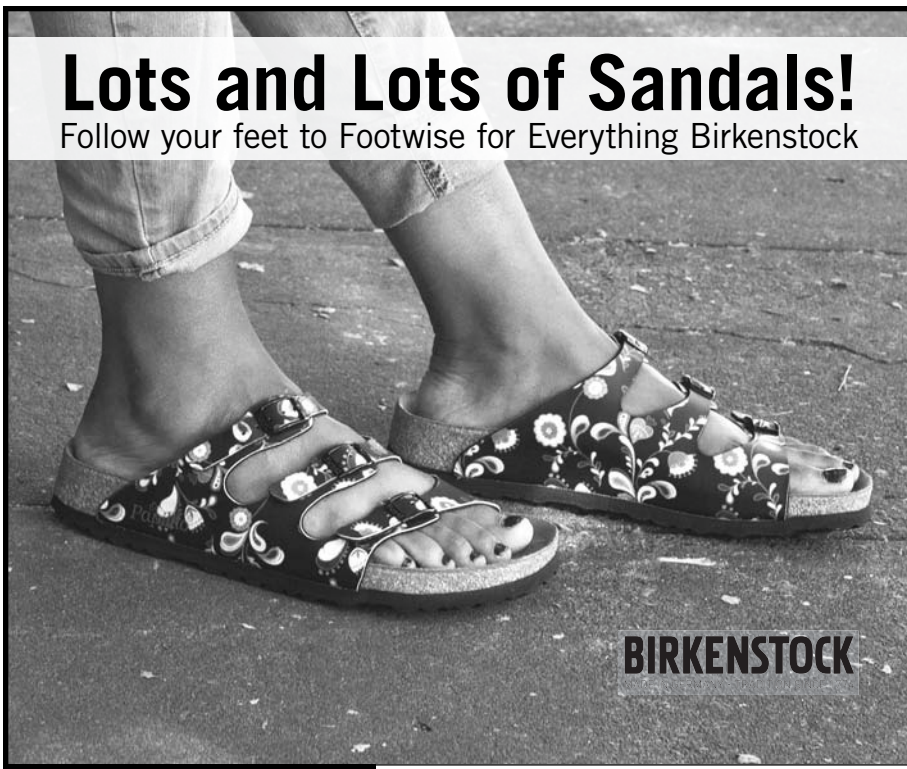
She says the search might start in September or October but was unwilling to discuss further details until after the Aug. 21 meeting. Berman has been out of office for the past few weeks and all attempts to contact him have been unsuccessful. ■

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— 4J PARENT LISA CHRISTON

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