



To: Mr. Todd Collins, Trustee, Palo Alto Unified School District Board of Education
From: The Executive Board of the Palo Alto Educators Association

cc: Palo Alto Unified School District Board of Education
Dr. Don Austin, Superintendent, Palo Alto Unified School District

Dear Mr. Collins,

As a guest on a recent [Ed Leadership Podcast](#), (11/21/21), hosted by Glean, a for-profit company offering services for school districts, you commented at length about the work of our district and our teachers. Many members of the Palo Alto Educators Association brought this podcast to the attention of the Executive Board, and this response reflects our collective observations and concerns. In reviewing the podcast, we have noted several misrepresentations of the work of educators in the district, and two violations of board bylaws. The resulting damage to staff morale, and to district and educator reputations, requires a corrective response and assurances regarding future public comments.

Since its release, the podcast has had a deleterious effect on staff morale. Four of the most concerning sections are quoted and refuted in detail in the table attached to this letter. In short, there are errors in the “who, what, when, why, and how” of PAUSD literacy instruction, assessment, and data. Some of your statements misrepresent our work, damaging the reputation of our district and its educators. We are always striving to improve as educators, but we are not deficient in the manners and degrees you related in this podcast. These errors alone warrant a public correction and apology.

Furthermore, [Board Bylaw 9010](#) establishes expectations for trustees when speaking to the media or the public: “individual Board members should recognize that their statements may be perceived as reflecting the views and positions of the Board. Board members have a responsibility to identify personal viewpoints as such and not as the viewpoint of the Board.” During the podcast, you are repeatedly identified as a trustee, and you speak frequently in the second person plural, describing (sometimes inaccurately) what *we* know or don’t know, what *we* do and how *our* practices come up short. In some cases, these are your personal assumptions and conclusions; there is no disclaimer that would address the expectations set forth in the board bylaw.

Within the podcast, you also mention the ongoing curriculum review in the Elementary Literacy Adoption Committee, and express a preferred outcome for their process. This committee received explicit assurances that there would not be any board influence in the process, in keeping with [Board Bylaw 9005](#), which enjoins trustees to observe and honor boundaries between their responsibilities and those belonging to the Superintendent and staff.

Were any of our members to misrepresent the district and violate board policies, we would anticipate disciplinary actions. School board members are not subject to the same kind of supervision or discipline that staff members are, but should be held no less accountable – perhaps more accountable due to the special trust inherent in the role of a trustee.

For the good of the district’s employees, the community, and the Board of Education as an entity, we request that you publicly acknowledge and apologize for factual errors in the podcast comments and



their negative impact, along with affirming the need for greater accuracy in public comments that adhere to board bylaws.

Sincerely,

The Executive Board of the Palo Alto Educators Association (PAEA)

- Teri Baldwin, President
- David Cohen, Vice-President
- Diane Ichikawa, Secretary
- David Tomatis, Treasurer
- Tom Culbertson, Member-at-Large (Elementary Schools)
- Kelly Zalatimo, Member-at-Large (Middle Schools)
- Marc Iglar, Member-at-Large (High Schools)

Table: Errors and mischaracterizations re: PAUSD in the [Ed Leadership Podcast](#), (11/21/21).

Statement by Mr. Collins	Corrections
<p>The Benchmark Assessment System (BAS) “only has value for assigning students a level”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers and specialists spent an entire Professional Learning day in October looking at how to use the BAS to guide instruction. In fact, teachers have been told that the reading level is the least important piece of data to get from the BAS. The comprehension, decoding and fluency elements of the assessment provide data for what next steps to take with our students. BAS also allows teachers to observe student reading behaviors and skills already learned, and those which need to be taught. • Before BAS teachers have been using other running record assessments to gather information on students’ decoding and comprehension, including at the K-2 level, for well over 20 years.
<p>Mr. Collins agreed with the characterization “K-2 is a data dead zone” and said “for the first time we are using a spreadsheet to look at students’ BAS scores”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PAUSD has been collecting this data for grades K-2 at the district level three times per year for years. Specialists and classroom teachers formally and informally assess students’ literacy almost every day through individual interaction and small group lessons; basically, every literacy interaction between teacher and student is on some level an assessment.
<p>“BAS does not strike me as an effective or good or detail-oriented assessment. It’s basically a tool for assigning leveled readers to students.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr. Collins is not trained as a teacher and has never taught emergent readers, he does not have a good grasp of all the skills required to develop proficient readers. Phonemic awareness and phonics are absolutely an essential component of developing reading skills. In order to use the BAS most effectively, teachers gather data on reading behaviors, skills, and



	<p>strategies, all of which are evaluated in determining an instructional level and an independent level. Teachers use much more data than is shared at the district level.</p>
<p>Regarding Teachers College literacy curriculum “Our teachers really like it in part because most of the students they teach already know how to read.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most kindergarteners do not know how to conventionally read coming into school. They learn the foundational skills in kindergarten and first grade, which helps them start to conventionally read. Independent reading abilities can develop in either grade. Some children do become independent readers in kindergarten or even before kindergarten. Teachers teach students at their instructional level and build from there.
<p>“Our kids were not getting any phonics, any phonemic awareness, any core foundational skills at all. ...It was a surprise that more kids didn’t fail.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not true. Foundational skills are part of an intentional balanced literacy practice informed by ongoing formative assessment. Our teachers are trained to apply a variety of instructional methods and strategies to meet the needs of each student. Our professional teachers differentiate to meet the needs of our students every day. While the district might not have had one formal phonics program, primary teachers taught phonics and phonemic awareness to students. It is a foundation in kindergarten, first and second grade programs. • The awareness of just how many people have dyslexia – up to one-in-five – was new information for educators across the country, not just PAUSD. All school districts really needed to look at how to address this new information and how to teach students with dyslexia.

Additional note: The podcast includes considerable discussion of information and data from careads.org, a website for a newly formed California Reading Coalition. A review of the website (as of December 13) yields no information to indicate how this new organization is funded or organized. There are no names. The Reading Report Card mentioned in the podcast does not list any authors, nor does it offer any validation of its methodology through similar studies, additional data from the same sources, or additional sources of related data. We would appreciate greater transparency regarding Mr. Collins’ role and his plans with this new entity, and believe the Board and the community are entitled to that as well.