

Ambushed

DR. GLORIA C. DUFFY President and CEO



Some of the local media had a field day earlier this fall, reporting on the forced resignation of Santa Clara County School Superintendent Colleen Wilcox. According to the press, the reason for her departure was alleged “harassment” of her administrative employees.

But the “back-story” to this situation has not previously been reported. It should be stated at the outset that Wilcox is a member of the Board of Governors of The Commonwealth Club and chair of its Silicon Valley Advisory Council, so we have had the opportunity to experience her personal integrity and professional leadership.

When Dr. Wilcox was hired as its chief in 1993, the Santa Clara County Office of Education (SCCOE) was mired in a large budget deficit. She quickly turned the financial situation around, partly by purchasing a new office building at a favorable price. She went on to improve teacher recruitment through creating the first state-wide education job application web site. She raised \$60 million for special education program facilities, strengthened innovative programs like the Walden West outdoor science school in San Jose and founded the Silicon Valley Reads literacy program. She created “Operation Graduate,” a program for veterans who left school to serve in WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War to obtain their high school diplomas. She served as president of the national Horace Mann League and was named California Superintendent of the Year in 1999.

But the Santa Clara County Office of Education has 1,900 employees, and among these have been some problem employees. Over time, Wilcox tried to manage these employees to higher standards of performance. One employee whose job performance was under scrutiny made a counterstrike, alleging that Wilcox was harassing them. This allowed the employee to protect their own job security, because once they charged harassment, if Wilcox took any action against them, even if their charges were never substantiated, Wilcox would be deemed to be “retaliating” against this person, which is not permitted under current laws.

Wilcox herself requested an investigation of the harassment allegation. Other employees volunteered anecdotes to the investigators. Wilcox had, for instance, offered free tickets to a Latino cultural event to a Hispanic employee. She required that a Latina Head-start teacher speak English to her classes. Despite such instances

being spun in the report as Wilcox’s “heightened focus on race and ethnicity” in relating to her employees, to regard them as “harassment” would require the thinnest of thin skins.

The dearth of actual instances of harassment, or of retaliation against employees, in the report is reflected in its final paragraph: “There is no evidence that actual retaliation has occurred against Employee 11 and Employee 5. There is evidence that Dr. Wilcox may have an intention to attempt to retaliate in the future.” An “intention to attempt to retaliate?”

In reality, Wilcox is fluent in Spanish and served in the Peace Corps in Guatemala. As a speech pathologist who overcame a severe stutter, she continues to volunteer in a Guatemalan clinic that repairs children’s cleft palates. As a leader in the public school system, as well as a multi-culturalist herself, she celebrated diversity, including by increasing minority employment at the SCCOE more than 37 percent during her tenure. She increased the number of Hispanic employees in management positions by more than 50 percent.

Instead of smoking out that the poorly performing employees’ strategy against Wilcox was a cover for protecting their own jobs, the elected County School Board jumped in and hammered Wilcox. They even hired a public relations firm to make sure their message, and not Wilcox’s record of promoting minorities and achieving progress on educational goals, was what got through to the media and the public. Hence the media circus screaming “racism” and “harassment.”

Why did the County School Board take this approach? Lacking formal backgrounds in education, and with other limitations in their qualifications for the offices in which they serve, the board members have been uncomfortable with Wilcox’s expertise and strong leadership role. They seem to hope to play a stronger role themselves.

So here is what the County School Board and these other folks have accomplished: The loss of an outstanding educational leader, and her public vilification with no acknowledgment of her many accomplishments for the schools and students in Santa Clara County. \$485,000 of public dollars spent in payment to Wilcox for terminating her contract early. A blurring of the true meaning of harassment and a caricature of political correctness. What a sad episode in the life of our community. Ω



Dr. Colleen Wilcox