

After JCPS protests, now what?



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11:35 a.m. EDT May 14, 2016



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It's been a tumultuous couple weeks in Jefferson County Public Schools, with massive protests from teachers and other employees, revelations about a "code of silence" and questions about the district's leadership from some of its board members.

Superintendent Donna Hargens and other district officials have moved to try to allay concerns - reiterating a commitment to competitive teacher salaries, for instance, and noting that recommendations from a code of conduct committee are simply suggestions.

But so far, little has been fully ironed out and settled - meaning the coming weeks are also not likely to be restful for the superintendent of the state's largest school district.

"It probably won't be as intense as the past two weeks, but the school safety and competitive salary issues have not been resolved, so our membership will definitely remain engaged," teachers union President Brent McKim said Friday.

Teachers and other district employees have rallied in recent weeks - with as many as 1,000 showing up to protest outside Tuesday's JCPS board meeting - over concerns about the idea of possible pay freezes for many employees and a district committee's suggested changes to the code of conduct.

At a board meeting on April 26, JCPS Chief Business Officer Tom Hudson presented the idea from a community and district group of [freezing step raises](#) next school year for all district employees making more than \$14 an hour. The idea, raised as part of a discussion of a comprehensive salary review that found that the district was paying a "premium" for some employees' salaries compared to other districts, garnered immediate blowback from the teachers union and other employee groups.

JCPS later clarified that all salary changes were subject to union negotiation and that no recommendation of a pay freeze was imminently forthcoming. But many employees said they [remained concerned and insulted](#).

Hargens announced Tuesday that the company that conducted the salary review would be coming to Louisville at 3 p.m. on May 23 to answer further questions about the study, saying that any recommendation to change salary structures "will be a result of a thorough process that involves all stakeholders."

Meanwhile, a separate work session also on April 26 gave JCPS board members [a first look at recommendations from the district's code of conduct committee](#) that included eliminating suspensions as a possible disciplinary measure for certain infractions, such as for middle and high schoolers' profanity, dress code violations or use of tobacco products.

Those suggestions also [sparked opposition](#) from many in the community.

The district has announced that the code of conduct committee will reconvene again beginning May 20 to review responses to its initial suggestions and talk further about code of conduct revisions.

Meanwhile, Hargens said she is inviting "key stakeholders" to a May 23 summit to discuss how to create more coherence in the district, particularly around student

behavior. A JCPS spokeswoman said invites have not yet been sent out for that summit.

Those two issues, as well as revelations from an internal auditor that [JCPS has a "code of silence"](#) when it comes to reporting accurate restraint and seclusion data, have some questioning the leadership of the school district.

Board member Steph Horne on Tuesday apologized to the JCPS community for them feeling disrespected and not supported, and said she questioned whether the district was headed in a strong direction.

"I'm questioning the superintendent's leadership," Horne said. "It's unclear to me what direction we're going. It's just really unclear."

Board member Linda Duncan said Wednesday that she was "distressed" by the turmoil of recent weeks and said she wasn't sure if Hargens was fully aware of the ramifications of some things her administration has done recently.

Duncan said she will likely keep the turmoil of the last few weeks in mind when Hargens' evaluation comes up over the summer. She pointed out that [she'd been against giving Hargens a four-year contract](#) back in 2015, saying she doesn't think superintendents should get a second four-year contract automatically.

"You don't give someone a four-year contract. You give one or two years at a time so you have options," Duncan said.

Duncan said she is concerned that the superintendent's summit and the meeting on the salary study are not until a day before the next board meeting. "That doesn't give much time for reflection or sharing with stakeholders," she said.

Hargens said Friday that she takes "the feedback seriously, and I remain focused on developing strategies to move our district forward."

"I am committed to continue working collaboratively with the board, members of my leadership team, our teaching professionals and the community to ensure we have the policies and resources necessary for the absolute best learning environment for our students," Hargens said in a statement. "Every decision I make is with this in mind."

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