

SUNDAY EDITION | JCPS turmoil testing Donna Hargens' support on school board

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (WDRB) – On Tuesday, more than a thousand teachers, students and parents all-but shut down Newburg Road outside Jefferson County Public Schools headquarters.

For hours, they chanted and held signs that read: "Parents, Teachers, Students United" and "Support Our Schools and Staff," prompting honks from passing cars.

The rally – and the overflow crowd at the school board meeting later that night -- marked the culmination of weeks of anxiety over the district's flirtation with relaxing student discipline policies and freezing salaries for most employees, including teachers.

It was a community uproar unlike any that JCPS Superintendent Donna Hargens has faced in her five years leading the district of more than 100,000 students.

And though Hargens is under contract through 2019, the recent turmoil appears to have eroded at least some of her support on the school board.

"I am questioning the superintendent's leadership...it's unclear to me what direction we are going," said board member Stephanie Horne said during Tuesday's meeting, prompting loud applause from the huge crowd gathered in the auditorium of the Van Hoose Education Center.

Last February, Horne was among the 6-1 majority on the board that gave Hargens a contract extension through June 2019.

But in interviews last week, board Chairman David Jones Jr. was the only member of six contacted who explicitly offered support for Hargens. (One member, Lisa Willner, could not be reached for comment).

The turmoil comes just as the board is in the midst of crafting its annual evaluation of Hargens. Following Tuesday's four-hour meeting, board members met privately with Hargens for 90 minutes to discuss her performance.

Members Chris Brady, Chuck Haddaway and Diane Porter all declined to give definitive positions on Hargens, pointing instead to the evaluation that will be released in June.

"Am I concerned?" Brady said. "Absolutely."

Haddaway said the upcoming evaluation "will be crucial for her and for the district."

Though she couldn't be reached for an interview, Willner has become more vocal in her concerns about the district's "leadership" in recent board meetings.

Hargens, who came to Louisville in 2011 from the Wake County, N.C., school district, said in an interview that she is "committed to Jefferson County Public Schools and to the students."

She sidestepped a question about her job security, saying, "I am actually focused on what we are doing to finish this school year off strong."



JCPS Superintendent Donna Hargens (WDRB News file photo)



Hundreds of people rallied outside the JCPS board meeting on May 10, 2016.



Eastern High School walk-in on May 4, 2016 (WDRB file photo)

She added that she appreciates each of the seven school board members.

"I certainly listen carefully to their feedback," she said. "I think we are lucky to have the board that we have. They care about students."

Jones acknowledged the last few weeks "have been difficult for our JCPS community," but he described Hargens as leader taking on the district's entrenched policies.

"The organization is old-fashioned, has been doing things the same way in a lot of ways," Jones said in an interview. "The high-level challenge is that we have to do things differently in order to get where we are trying to go, which is to have schools we are proud of. And Donna has shown courage in driving change."

For example, under Hargens' watch, the district has had a curriculum management audit and an unflattering examination of central office bureaucracy by the former State Auditor Adam Edelen.

Jones also mentioned the creation of an internal audit system with an independent firm overseeing the work.

"That's a huge deal," he said. "Under her leadership we have identified a path of change, as defined in Vision 2020 (the district's strategic plan) and marshaling the resources so we can personalize education."

At the other end of spectrum is board member Linda Duncan, who cast the lone vote against extending Hargens' contract last year.

On Friday, Duncan told WDRB she remains concerned about Hargens' leadership after a difficult year for the school system.

"How we remember what we have been through since the last evaluation is going to be very significant in how this evaluation looks," Duncan said.

Duncan added that Hargens' response to the recent uproar has been underwhelming.

"The number one thing I want to know is who is really leading this district?" she said. "How can you tune out all of those protests with confidence and not be responsive to it?"

Code of Conduct

The recent turmoil started at the end of April with proposed changes to the student code of conduct that would [reduce punishments for some offenses for which thousands of students are typically removed from class each year](#).

The code of conduct committee -- a group of people selected by the district to revise conduct and discipline procedures every two years -- met from January through March and brought those recommendations to the school board during a work session on April 26.

[Student behavior and discipline has been a hot topic this year](#), with some teachers quitting mid-year due to behavioral problems and what they say is a lack of support from district officials.

Hargens said the report was "only an update on the work the committee members had done thus far."

However, the last of five code of conduct committee meetings was held on March 25.

Hargens has since said that committee will reconvene. Board member Horne says she has been told that will take place [on May 20](#).

"They have six more weeks of work to come up with code of conduct final recommendations that will be presented to the board," Hargens wrote in a May 7 op-ed piece in The Courier-Journal.

Salary study

The upheaval continued following the long-awaited release of a comprehensive salary review at a separate school board work session on April 26.

The salary study found that JCPS pays premium salaries to its teachers, which provides a competitive advantage in attracting and retaining quality instructors, but that more than 7,353 positions in JCPS pay at or above the maximum of the market pay range.

JCPS Chief Business Officer Tom Hudson told the board as part of the district's "next steps," officials would bring two recommendations to the school board on May 10.

Those recommendations, which Hudson and Hargens both said came from a "Community Advisory Team" comprised of school administrators and community members, included no "step" or cost of living increases in 2016-17 for all employees earning more than \$14 an hour.

Hudson was also planning on asking the school board for permission to negotiate a percentage increase in 2016-17 for only those employees earning less than \$14 an hour.

"This is a problem at high end," Hudson said during the April 26 work session. "While we are dealing with the problem at the high end, we want to make sure we are taking care of the people at the low end."

Neither JCPS employees nor officials with each of the district's five unions were told about the results of the study or the recommendations until ten minutes before the report was shared with the public, prompting outrage.

During Tuesday's meeting, Hargens claimed the community concerns over the salary study were caused by "misinformation."

"There has been no recommendation about salaries, and there has been no recommendation about the code of conduct," she said. "So it's important that people have the correct information."

However, when she was asked why the words "recommendation" and "May 10" (the date of Tuesday's board meeting) were used in Hudson's April 26 report, Hargens could not say.

"It should have been subject to negotiations," she said. "Salary is always a negotiated item."