

Ferndale School Board Responses to Questions About Superintendent Gary Meier's Consulting Work, October 2012. via email to The Ferndale 115 News

Keith Warnick, Board President

1. Are you supportive of Gary Meier's consulting work?

Yes! I voted in support of the Superintendent's contract with the district and in support of the ICE/FPS contract. Both were recommended by the Policy Committee to the full Board for consideration and both were passed by the Board at our June 2011 meeting.

2. How does the consulting work benefit the school district?

The main benefit is the financial gain we get without hiring any additional personnel to facilitate the tasks included in the contract. The collaborative contracts have brought in a substantial amount of funds that benefit all the students in this district. Many districts are decimating their fund equity to balance their budgets; eliminating programs, bussing, implementing pay-to-play at up to \$500 per family; negotiating 5% to 10% pay cuts for employees. The Board and Administration, have worked together to find revenue streams outside the norm. This has allowed us to add to our fund equity each year for the past decade. Continued emphasis on new funding sources will be necessary going forward. Also the Legislature recently passed a bill requiring each district in 2011 to participate in 'Best Practices' to get back part of recent per-pupil funding reductions. The first year we needed to participate in 4 of 5 Best Practices for \$100 per student; \$400,000 for Ferndale, after \$503 per student was taken away by the same Legislation; \$2,000,000. The second year we need to participate in 7 of 8 Best Practices for \$52 per student; \$200,000 after no per-pupil increase. So beyond the direct benefit we gained additional state aid that added more to our General Fund budget!

3. Have you seen any downside to the relationships between Meier, ICE and Michigan Future?

Based on my previous response, I see no downside. As Board president, I've heard no complaints from district employees.

4. Do you have any additional comments about this situation that you would like the public to know?

Some people have suggested that the Board has not done enough in vetting these contracts, making it sound like these were put together quickly and presented to the Board with little notice. Those suggestions obviously come from uneducated people, relying on hearsay, innuendo and misinformation, having no idea of the inner workings of the Board and administration. The Board oversees a \$40 million entity. The Board has legal counsel that reviews all contracts we put together for the Superintendent, bargaining units and outside organizations. We know what we're doing! We've done this before. The Ferndale Public Schools have come a long way in the last ten years. We went from being on the verge of state takeover to being a highly respected school district

within Oakland County and in the tri-county area. Many districts visit and ask how we have been able to do what we do in these challenging times. Districts across the state know Ferndale for its forward thinking and strong bottom line. We have had national recognition for our University High School. We are not going backward or standing still.

Chuck Moeser, Vice President

1. Are you supportive of Gary Meier's consulting work?

Yes and I always have been. I am proud of my performance and the decisions the Board has made as a whole.. Each Board Member has a public and fiscal responsibility to review, vet and decide what is in the best interest of the entire district, all students. We are charged with how to keep this district a full service district even while the State continues to challenge us with budget cuts and new unfunded mandates, which drives us to find ways to increase revenues on our own. I presume that all Board Members conduct themselves in a manner that reflects their public duty. All Board members are assigned to various committees that are charged with vetting items and giving recommendations back to the full Board. Gary Meier's consulting was vetted with questions, answers and was affirmed by the full Board. The Board process is clear and when a contract or change is needed, then such change is sought thru the proper committee and on to the full Board for approval. This process has worked well for a long time.

2. How does the consulting work benefit the school district?

In my opinion, when the Superintendent came to this district, our general fund was approximately \$100,000, was depleting rapidly and would soon have put this District in danger of having a fiscal manager appointed by the state due to inaction from the previous Administration. It was Gary Meier, his team and the Board who worked countless number of hours, days and years to raise this level to over \$4 M while still providing a full service school district curriculum and all the extra curricula activities this district has come to expect (band, theater, sports, etc.). This contract between the district and Michigan Futures and now between the district and ICE will have brought in almost \$1,000,000 into the district allowing other funds to be redirected to directly benefit the students. On another front, being involved in this activity allows Mr. Meier the opportunity to help create other educational programs that will be as successful as ours, see how they work and bring back the lessons he learns that could help our district also.

3. Have you seen any downside to the relationships between Meier, ICE and Michigan Future?

None, except that it is being used by some to attack actions of the current Board during an election year. A better course of action would be to have those individuals' present clear ideas and plans that could be reviewed and implemented by any Board that would continue to move this district forward educationally. These ideas also need to be

consistent with keeping the district financially solvent and supporting all the successful things this district has already; education, music, band, theater, sports, etc. I believe it takes the Administration, Board and the entire community to make these things a reality for the students. If these funds from ICE are lost, I do not know how K-12, other programs and teachers may be negatively impacted, something I certainly do not wish to see happen.

4. Do you have any additional comments about this situation that you would like the public to know?

I understand that other Board Members have already stated how open the Superintendent has been concerning all contracts, public and private. When the district first entered into contract discussions with Michigan Futures (MF), I was directly involved in those reviews. That contract was approved by the Board in Open Meetings and was directly between the district and MF. As the first two year contract was ending, it was MF that wanted to change how the funding would work. MF contracted with ICE for the services MF needed. ICE was then left to find resources needed to conduct the ICE work for MF. When this change first happened, I did see both contracts, which were virtually the same as previous contracts. It was ICE that allowed the district to continue to benefit from the MF work to the tune of up to \$180,000 per year. This means other district funds could be utilized more effectively for students and teachers. The charges of a lack of transparency are ridiculous. The public and private contracts under question have been available for review with the Superintendent, including the Superintendent's contract which was also reviewed and approved in Open Meetings. Some citizens have scheduled and cancelled meetings and are now complaining about not being able to view the contracts. It's interesting that these contract questions never came up from Board Members or the public when all district contracts were reviewed and approved during various Open Meetings.

Katrina Collins, Secretary

1. Are you supportive of Gary Meier's consulting work?

Yes, I am supportive of Mr.Meier's consulting work. I have read the response by Mr. Moeser and by Mr. Pflieger, and I am in complete agreement with their views. I could reiterate what they have written, however I do not believe I can improve upon their comments. I will say that I fully reviewed the contracts prior to voting on them, I understood what they meant then (over a year ago) and I understood what I was voting for when they were unanimously approved by the School Board.

2. How does the consulting work benefit the school district?

The consulting work benefits the district financially with the length of the contract bringing close to a million dollars to the district over five years. This is a substantial amount of money that otherwise the district would have to try and make up by possibly cutting programs and/or staff. There are many other advantages to this consulting contract, but because of the financial situation most Cities and School Districts find

themselves in, the loss of this contract would impose a considerable hardship upon our students.

3. Have you seen any downside to the relationships between Meier, ICE and Michigan Future?

I have not seen any downside to the consulting contract as it relates to the operations of the District, however I am saddened by the group CLEAR's representations of this matter. CLEAR has made false accusations regarding this situation and the only reason I can discern is to win an election. It may be good politics but it is not what we should be talking about. The Ferndale Public Schools are not perfect, there is room for improvement in many areas, BUT making Gary Meier and the ICE/Michigan Futures contracts a campaign issue is divisive and non-productive. We should be spending our time on issues like improving test scores, student achievement and financial stability. These are the topics that will continue to improve our district. Our progress will continue to improve if we focus on real issues, not made-up political red herrings.

4. Do you have any additional comments about this situation that you would like the public to know?

As stated above, we need to focus our attention on real issues, not the canard that the CLEAR and BOLD folks seem to want to make the defining issue of the School Board election.

Jim Pflieger, Treasurer

1. Are you supportive of Gary Meier's consulting work? Yes - absolutely!. What has gone undiscussed is what the intent of the "Consulting Work" by our Superintendent and Administrators really is. Mr. Meier is an enormously respected School Administrator with extensive experience in creating and running schools with challenging populations. His administrative staff is equally well regarded. Michigan Future Schools, the organization that sought our assistance, is a non profit, non partisan group that has as its mission the creation of smaller sized High Schools in the City of Detroit that would be successful in graduating students from high school and moving no less than 85% on to successful college careers. This is very similar to the purpose of our own University High School, which is a model for Michigan Future. If you care about every child being able to attend good schools and obtain a good education, you have to support sharing our District Administrator's expertise with other organizations that are trying to help teach children.

2. How does the consulting work benefit the school district? As the Treasurer of the School Board, the obvious reason is the extra revenue that this consulting contract brings in to the School District. The original contract between the Ferndale School District and Michigan Future Schools resulted in revenue of \$450,000 over its two year term. This covered Offices in unused space in District buildings, Administrative and Business Office

support, Technical support, network access, and computer and phone use as well as consultation with Ferndale School Administrators. The second contract, which is between the Ferndale School District and Innovative Consulting (Mr. Meier's consulting firm) is for a three year term and will bring in an additional \$498,000. The scope of work for this contract is the same as the previous contract with Michigan Future Schools, with the exception that the rented office space is no longer required. Additionally, in response to the "Best Practices" requirement from the State of Michigan, the Ferndale School District qualified for an extra \$100 per student in part, because we were able to demonstrate the efficiency generating impact of the sale of the services covered under these contracts to the State. Beyond the extra revenue, the Ferndale School District gains significant status with County and State organizations and government entities who recognize the expertise that our people bring to the table. Finally, if you take a less parochial view of the benefits being derived, CHILDREN who get the opportunity to attend successful schools that our expertise helps establish are the ultimate winners

3. Have you seen any downside to the relationships between Meier, ICE and Michigan Future? The only downside in what otherwise has been a very successful set of relationships is that the consulting work has become a political football for some without any seeming regard to the actual facts

4. Do you have any additional comments about this situation that you would like the public to know? I would like to thank you for this question as it allows me to get some of the facts in front of your readers.

The two "Consulting" contracts between the Ferndale Public Schools / Michigan Future Schools and between Ferndale Public Schools / Innovative Consulting are public documents and are available to anyone that cares to see them. They were reviewed by Committees of the Board of Education in meetings open to the public and approved as publicized agenda items during regular meetings of the Board of Education that were also open to the public (and videotaped & broadcast on the School District's cable channel). Both were "Fixed Fee for Service" contracts that clearly called out the scopes of work covered and the dollars associated with each area of support provided. The contract approved in June, 2011 also clearly spelled out that the consulting work of the Superintendent was not allowed to have any impact on his duties as a full time administrator of the School District. To date, there have been no expressions of concern on the part of the Board regarding any negative impact of the consulting work on his performance nor has any complaint been brought to the Board from any member of Ferndale schools or citizen of the District. The total revenue brought to the School District under these two contracts, which were indisputably brought to us thru the efforts of Mr. Meier will total over \$948,000 at the end of the current agreement.

Those are the facts... now my opinion. The allegations of a "Lack of Transparency" around these two contracts are ludicrous on their face, given they were both reviewed in open to the public Board Committee meetings and unanimously approved by the full School Board of Education at open to the Public / videotaped meetings. Anyone wishing to read either of these contracts could have done so then and could do so now by

requesting to see them at the Harding Administration Business offices. They are public documents, as are the votes that were taken that approved them. If you don't attend Committee meetings, if you don't attend Board Meetings, if you don't watch Board Meetings on Cable TV, if you don't ask to see documents, if you don't request a Board Meeting package, and if you don't talk to those that do, or if you don't understand the discussions or documents, then the fact that you are not familiar with Board actions is not a problem of "Transparency".

As far as the demands that the Ferndale Board of Education review and approve the contract between Michigan Future Schools and Innovative Consulting, I would just remind your readers that the Ferndale School District is not a party to that agreement and has no authority to approve or disapprove it, even if there was a reason to want to. I would also remind them that Mr. Meier, in an admirable spirit of openness, has reviewed that contract with a number of people that made requests to do so, including members of the Clear Political Action Committee Board and, to date, no concerns about that contracts contents have been received by the School Board from any one. There have been a succession of news articles, a lot of comments and statements, and a fair amount of noise around this "situation" but, in my opinion, with no evidence to the contrary, there is no "there" there!

Darcey McLaughlin, Trustee

1. Are you supportive of Gary Meier's consulting work? Absolutely. Gary should be commended for sharing his expertise with other districts while at the same time, bringing in additional monetary resources for our district. It is important to remember, Gary was sought after for this work because he is an outstanding administrator.
2. How does the consulting work benefit the school district? Simply speaking monetarily. To date – the district has benefited with close to \$800,000 in additional revenue. When this current contract ends, it will have brought in closer to \$1,000,000 for our district.
3. Have you seen any downside to the relationships between Meier, ICE and Michigan Future? None whatsoever.
4. Do you have any additional comments about this situation that you would like the public to know? Thank you for the opportunity to provide some insight for the public. I believe that the public should know that the newly formed group CLEAR and a present school board member who question this long-standing consulting agreement between our district and Michigan Future, Inc., are inferring that for a lack of timesheets, our Superintendent and his immediate staff do not put in a full work week or that conflicts of interest may exist. To suggest that the administrative team is not working enough hours is ridiculous. Our FPS administrative, teaching, and support staffs are some of the hardest working individuals you will ever meet. They put in countless hours on behalf of our district and our students. I have firsthand knowledge that our Superintendent works 60 or more hours per week for our district and that his private consulting work is in addition to those hours. Other administrative staff members are in our buildings well into

the evenings week after week. I know this because I am often at the evening meetings with them. The public should know that CLEAR members, however, have only just begun to attend board-related meetings.

Mr. Meier's now private contract with Michigan Future, Inc. that is being questioned during this political season in the media started out as an agreement between our district and Michigan Future, Inc. and was voted on and approved unanimously by all school board members. Last year the contract transitioned to a private contract at Michigan Future, Inc.'s request. Private contracts are private for a reason – they contain proprietary information. Mr. Meier continues to pass revenue from that agreement on to our district with more than \$800,000 received to date from both agreements. By the end of both contracts, the total revenue benefiting Ferndale's schools will be closer to \$1,000,000. CLEAR has been informed of this repeatedly by our Superintendent, our Board President, and our legal counsel. Although Mr. Meier is not obligated to show this contract to the public – he has chosen to do so when asked about it – even to several CLEAR members, contrary to their media statements. If public individuals or a school board member has ever felt that this contract has interfered with the business of our district over the past four years – this is the first we have heard of it. Mr. Meier's employment contract with our district has allowed the opportunity to perform outside consulting work since 2000. Are the CLEAR group and its candidates saying that if elected, they would intend to force Mr. Meier to amend his current long standing employment contract to prevent any outside consulting and forgo alternative revenue to the district? I would love to know what their resolution or real issue here.

Unfortunately, the November election may be divisive for our community. Much work needs to be done, and publicly accusing our administrators and Board during a political season only damages the reputation of the district.

Nancy Kerr-Mueller, Trustee

1. Are you supportive of Gary Meier's consulting work?

No, I think it is a conflict of interest to be part of the process of creating schools that will be in competition with our district schools. While I believe that all children deserve a wonderful education it is my job to look out for the students in the Ferndale School District and those that school of choice into our district family. Making sure that the people we hire are spending their talents here are a concern. There is always more work to be done.

2. How does the consulting work benefit the school district?

I am not really sure. I know it brings in money, but at the same time Gary Meier and fellow salaried, full-time Ferndale school administrators: Deputy superintendent Henry Gold, Director of Curriculum Barb Evoe and Director of Pupil Accounting and

Community Relations Stephanie Hall spend time and creative resources on these projects that could be spent on Ferndale projects. They are not required to keep track of the hours spent on these outside projects so I do not really have accurate information.

3. Have you seen any downside to the relationships between Meier, ICE and Michigan Future?

It has created distrust on the board and in the community.

4. Do you have any additional comments about this situation that you would like the public to know?

I asked to have the subject of the contracts tabled when the subject was initially brought up. Fellow board member Karen Twomey supported the move to table the discussion. Twomey and I could not gain majority board support to table the topic for further review. With no board support I voted yes out of frustration. It was a mistake to vote yes with the little information I had.

Karen Twomey, Trustee

I would just like to remind the media and public that Superintendent Gary Meier's name is not on the November ballot. It seems to me that the whole conversation is off topic. It would be unfair for me as a Board member to be critical of our Superintendent for doing work on a contract that I supported, and the Board approved. What I can be critical of is my own performance as a Board member and public servant. I cannot speak for others on the committee or Board. However upon reflection I am very dissatisfied with the job I personally did in vetting the contract and the complexities of the arrangement. I do not think that I was insistent enough on having more information and discussions before making such a large decision. That was my own responsibility, and I can only promise to try to do better. Whether or not I still support the contract is currently irrelevant. The relevant question is what improvements could or should be made in the board process?
