

August 16, 2023

John Bell, Senator/VSDB Board of Visitors

Patricia Trice, VSDB Superintendent

Dear Mr. Bell and Ms. Trice,

I am writing this letter to address my concerns regarding the recent VSDB Board of Visitors (BOV) meeting held on July 20, 2023, and to share observations that I had intended to present during the public session. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, all speakers were allotted only one minute to express their views, which did not allow sufficient time to share my concerns. At the outset of the meeting, Mr. Bell emphasized the importance of respect from the audience. However, there were instances during the meeting that left me questioning whether this respect was reciprocated towards our issues, concerns and needs.

Firstly, the decision to relocate the BOV meeting from VSDB to Richmond posed difficulties for VSDB alumni with fixed incomes who had to arrange transportation. Furthermore, shortening the meeting from the usual four hours to two hours without explanation was unexpected and diminished our ability to address important matters effectively.

Upon entering the building, encountering armed police officers and a metal detector was both disconcerting and disheartening. Such actions seemed to perpetuate a negative image of our community, which is unwarranted and concerning.

The setup of the meeting room hindered visual access to information and media, with columns obstructing our view of interpreters and erratic camera shots distracting from speakers. Given the professional background of Ms. Trice as an interpreter, and Mr. Bell's familiarity with the meeting room, it was disappointing to witness these barriers to effective communication.

I observed insensitive seating arrangements for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (D/HH) BOV members, with one positioned behind the other, impeding their participation. Ms. Trice's behavior during the meeting, including smirking and giggling at inappropriate moments, demonstrated a lack of respect and professionalism.

The composition of the BOV raised concerns, particularly the selection of a parent of a D/HH child who had never attended VSDB, and a member who formerly supervised Ms. Trice. Only two D/HH BOV members represent the minority perspectives, and several motions regarding

inaccuracies in the March meeting minutes, the need for debriefing from the last BOV meeting, and the accountability of BOV leadership and VSDB administration in question were denied.

This apparent lack of diverse representation and disregard for input from Deaf and Hard of Hearing BOV members undermines the democratic process.

I am deeply troubled by the inaccuracies displayed on the VSDB homepage, claiming accreditation by organizations that the school is no longer certified by. This misleading information undermines the school's credibility and reputation.

The limited time allocated for public statements, divided into one-minute slots, was belittling and condescending. This approach hindered meaningful dialogue and prevented a more constructive engagement with stakeholders.

Your failure to respond to our concerns and correspondence, along with your unwillingness to engage in open conversation, raises doubts about your commitment to the VSDB community and its stakeholders. This lack of responsiveness damages the school's standing and jeopardizes its relationships within the Deaf community.

Our concerns encompass various issues, such as declining education quality, lack of transparency, reports of a hostile environment, high attrition rates of Deaf employees, expired certifications and inadequacies in teacher preparation programs. These challenges require immediate attention to prevent further deterioration.

In closing, I urge you to consider the words of Paulo Freire: "If structure does not permit dialogue, the structure must be changed." I implore you to initiate an honest and open dialogue with the entire VSDB community, including students, faculty, staff, parents, and alumni. It is only through such collaborative efforts that we can begin to address the pressing issues facing VSDB.

Thank you for your attention and consideration.

Sincerely,

James M. Searls, Ph.D.

VSDB Class of 1970

EC:

Glenn Youngkin, Governor of Virginia

Jason Miyares, Attorney General

Aimee Guidera, Secretary of Education

Susan Clarke Schaar, Clerk of the Senate

Michele Long, President of the Virginia Association of the Deaf

Michele VanBoxlaere, President of the VSD Alumni Association