

## **JANUARY 8, 2018 STATEMENT FROM CHRIS HOWLEY**

After last week's joint meeting of the Town Council and HCDE, it's become clear we need to address the educational elephant in the room.

A little more than a year ago, this Council made the decision through a vote of 4-1 to consider options on how to better educate our greatest asset, kids on this mountain.

That decision was not made lightly. That decision was made with the most fundamental and basic of intentions.

It was a decision that has caused a lot of debate, angst and even some diatribes. For that, well, we hate that there have been hard feelings, but know that no one wanted heartache.

Still, there will not be any apologies. Nor should there be, from those on either side of the discussion. And regardless what the future holds, there is no doubt this community's support for its school children will never wane.

But, after last week's direct and somewhat surprising meeting with the powers that be at the Hamilton County school board, the details behind the decision to explore this option are more important than ever.

Know this:

Our community provided an unprecedented \$10,000,000 to have that high school built; Since Signal Mountain Middle/High School has become a reality, our community has provided more than \$21 million to assist the school system in their attempts to educate our kids. Yes, \$21 million, and all of that money is outside of all of the HCDE funding; That extra money that our community has provided has allowed the county to curb what it gives our schools by comparison.

There is no other school in our County providing that kind of secondary support. That's a tribute to everyone invested in the betterment of our community — past and present — but it also begs the question of fairness.

We have been required to augment a lot of needs and basics that have helped our schools stay among the best. But, if we are going to have to provide more for that level of success, why should we not explore looking at ways to make them even better, including looking at our own school system? That's not elitist or entitled or even intended to offend. But is a very reasonable question to ask. That's a fair question for we taxpayers of Hamilton County who expect the same support from the Hamilton County school system.

The struggles of Hamilton County schools as a whole are well-documented. Be them test scores or heartbreaking incidents or leadership, there are a lot of issues facing our school system and our kids.

But this has never been about the struggles of the system. This has, at least in the eyes of most of the Council and the extremely accomplished people on the SSVC committee who have volunteered their time, always been about the fairness and what is best for our kids.

The surprising turn of events of last week forces the need of this statement.

Last Thursday, we heard that our community's concerns were a distraction for the new leadership. And that "distraction" label came at what was slated to be the first "Community" conversation for the new regime.

There is no way we can peg two decades of deplorable decisions on Dr. Bryan Johnson and the new leadership that have been in place for less than a year.

What we can expect though is respect. Respect for the needs of how their system can meet the needs of our community rather than how our community must meet the needs of the system.

We have heard since Dr. Johnson was hired that this is a new day. A new way. A new approach for what we all should believe is the most important use of our county tax dollars — education of our kids.

Recognizing this, some of us met with Dr. Johnson and his staff in discussion of many issues that would help us improve education on the Mountain based on the research and findings that came out of the SSVC report. Those items, as well as several issues and concerns raised and brought directly to the Signal Mountain Town Council, would have little effect or cost to HCDE or the County.

To my joy, we had finally found a willing participant to listen, engage and discuss issues.

In a year's time, no other leader or representative (other than Mayor Coppinger) had the foresight and leadership to engage us in these concerns. Again, and again we heard over a year's time period, "I don't understand what you want", "I don't know what your issues are", and we are still hearing questions like that from our representatives. This shows a true lack of leadership, a true lack of commitment and quite frankly a true lack of concern for our students.

It is also of note that I am unaware in the past year of a single time that our elected representative has engaged, met, discussed, or listened to the group of citizens that had the initial concerns for the future of our schools. Statements like, "I hate going up on that Mountain," hardly conveys confidence and connection with a constituency.

Multiple one-on-one meetings with Dr. Johnson during the last month offer some hope and potential resolutions. The discussions and concepts proceeded well and eventually some HCDE staff and Town Staff and committee members were brought in to work through the details.

The items that we had discussion and I thought we had agreed upon were as follows:

Commitment to HCDE:

Disband the SSVC committee

Provide all documents related to SSVC committee for HCDE's use and help as needed

Make Resolution to cease seeking ISD and not take to referendum in 2018 (either August or November).

Dr. Johnson to announce the compromise and credit his leadership in working with the Town, who is

investigating the opportunity to separate, to address concerns and mediate a positive solution for improving education.

Commitment to Improving Education at the Mountain Schools.

Include SMMHS in the pilot program for later start times starting the 2018-2019 School Year. Make that permanent after the first year.

Provide 2 art teachers and 1 STEM teacher for Nolan & Thrasher. This will free up MEF funds and not make it necessary to decide what cannot be funded the next school year.

Provide similar funding for busing for off campus extracurricular activities at levels provided at other County schools.

Create a "advisory board, (SMHCDE Advisory Board)" consisting of five (5) members across the mountain Community to address mountain school issues similar to that on Lookout.

The SMHCDE Advisory Board would consist of three (3) people appointed by The Signal Mountain Town Council, one (1) appointed by Town of Walden Aldermen and one (1) appointed by the Hamilton County Mayor based on current enrollment in our schools. The SMHCDE Advisory Board will have the power to make final decisions on capital gifts to the three schools. It will also provide advice to HCDE staff on ideas for other schools in the County to be able to replicate the successes of the SM schools. The SMHCDE Advisory Board will meet with HCDE "C" Level Staff members, at a minimum Bi-Monthly (every other month) or more frequently as requested by HCDE.

Look into ways of eliminating school fees.

Signal and Walden families will be guaranteed continued zoning to the three SM. We understand you cannot commit/guarantee zoning for the entire mountain (unincorporated) due to planned/expected growth.

Fund custodial and field maintenance (seed and chemical only) for SMMHS sports fields at comparable levels provided the rest of the County Schools.

Work with Town of SM in opportunity for additional/separate entrance to SMMHS for safety of all the students and staff at both SMMHS and Nolan Schools.

Look at engaging in a similar Agreement as East Ridge for use and maintenance of Athletic fields and gymnasiums.

These are directly from my notes originally created on December 17, 2017 and honed as Dr. Johnson and I discussed these issues. If they look or sound familiar, they should.

After our meeting on December 21 at Signal Mountain Town Hall with Dr. Johnson, two of his staff, myself, Dr. Friedl and our Town Manager to go over the details. At Dr. Johnson's request, I agreed to meet the next morning with Dr. Johnson and Ms. Lennon to lay out the plan for her. After that meeting, I received a call from Ms. Lennon on how excited she was for the improvements, resolution and she looked forward to getting this done.

Somewhere over Christmas it must have gone wrong. On January 3, 2018, we were called once again to the HCDE offices under the guise of "reviewing and preparing for the presentation," we met with Dr. Johnson and five HCDE staff members (several of who are friends and neighbors). We were told then, a day prior to our joint meeting last Thursday, that everything we have worked toward was not going to happen. They did not feel it was right because they had not "engaged" the Community. One year's worth of study, angst, meetings, opinions was not enough input from this Community apparently to cause anything other than a "distraction" for the HCDE.

Obviously, leaving that meeting, and realizing that the HCDE abandoned a very reasonable resolution was extremely disappointing. We now had no idea what to expect from the meeting that was called for the sole purpose of outlining a resolution. The hopes that the new leadership was going to be an agent of change felt hollow.

Yes, it extremely refreshing to hear Dr. Johnson say this past Thursday at our joint meeting, after not hearing it for more than a year, "This needs to be about the children." It was refreshing, but it's the main refrain that the majority of the Town Council, SSVC and Community had been saying throughout this entire process.

So as many had hoped we would do, we directly engaged the HCDE, and once again it turned into a game of politics. The morning of the joint meeting one of our representatives came up with the great idea of creating an advisory board. In an article that morning in the TFP and at the joint meeting they mentioned funding for STEM and Arts at the elementary school level. They brought up earlier start times. They brought up the importance of looking at a second entrance for safety. And several other things were mentioned, (none committed to) that sounded awfully familiar to the multiple meetings we all we working together on.

No one on the committee or this council is looking for credit for this. We all have the same goal — educating our kids in the best possible way.

The reason to share these events is to illustrate that the petty politics, lack of leadership, and lack of focus on kids, seems to me, remains the same at HCDE. I truly believe that Dr. Johnson got strong armed into this position, but that does not make it less disappointing. As Dr. Johnson said in our last meeting at HCDE, "I have never encountered or imagined politics like this could be around education". Dr. Johnson will not be able to come out with the true story but we will be forced to protect those who swayed his position.

One thing, that has become blatantly clear, is that someone along the line was and scuttled a very reasonable resolution loaded with inexpensive improvements to education for the entire Mountain Community and ideas and improvements for the rest of the County.

My observation from this process after one year is that if there are not very drastic changes in the politics, thinking and leadership of the HCDE, particularly the school board, we will be facing much of the same. And our little Community that is such a "distraction", will not even receive the simplest of improvements in education because instead of engaging us, they rather teach us a lesson. An interesting attitude from those entrusted to educate our children.

As one of our Council members is quick to remind everyone, I do not speak for the Council. I am the

"weak" Town Mayor of Signal Mountain. Interestingly, neither the Town Council nor the SSVV is compensated and has absolutely nothing to gain financially out of this endeavor. But no one will ever convince me it was not a good thing to ask these questions and tackle hard issues.

Regardless, I will continue hold out hope that we will see some of the items, discussed with Dr. Johnson come to fruition. I will also continue to hold out hope that our County representatives on the HCDE Board and those that influence them can understand and change the way they engage the Communities. We all need to work together and be on the same page to effect real, positive change within our educational system. The main focus must now and always remain on the children.

Thank You.