

News

Wilson tries to rally as superintendent steps down



Kyle Edelman

Voices intern
Senior, Wilson

Amid controversy from his last job, Wilson Superintendent Curtis Baker has agreed to resign, Wilson School Board President Steve Ehrlich announced at the board's Feb. 21 meeting.

After Baker's resignation was announced, a wave of clapping ensued in the room packed with teachers, principals and parents. Baker, 58, is on administrative leave while his departure is figured out, including severance pay.

His resignation was triggered by an investigation by the state auditor general, released on Feb. 14, which said Baker showed poor judgment and lack of oversight while working as superintendent

at Moon Township School District, near Pittsburgh. Baker's lawsuit against that district is ongoing, according to officials.

Baker's brief, eight-month tenure as the head of the district left much to be desired, according to some students, and his abrupt departure leaves lots of questions.

Jessica Reichart, a junior at Wilson, saw fault in Baker's hiring from the start,

"Mr. Baker's allegations could have been easily discovered from the start by just Googling his name," Jessica said. "I just don't understand why the board did not delve deep into his past."

Dr. George Fiore, the former Wilson High School principal who is now Kutztown School District superintendent, was widely considered by students as a strong candidate to replace Dr. Rudy Ruth this time last year.

"I always believed Dr. Fiore would have been a much better candidate than Baker because he represents what Wilson is all about: character and community," Jessica said.

Baker's hiring process took

nearly nine months, so finding a new superintendent will likely not happen this school year.

In a press release, the district explained its lengthy process of hiring a new superintendent, upon Ruth's retirement.

During a busing meeting for parents held right before his departure, Ruth said in response to questions about Baker that the search committee worked "tirelessly" to obtain 27 applications, leading to 11 interviews and resulting in the top three candidates, from which Baker was selected as the best.

The search process "included conducting background checks and checking extensive character references," according to the school board's Feb. 21 press release.

Ruth told parents that 60 references were obtained on Baker's behalf.

In its press release, the school board explained that it knew about "some of the allegations contained in the February 14 Auditor General's report," but that since Baker was suing his old district, it didn't have all the

information and "reasonably believed" that Moon Township's newly elected board of directors had "unfairly removed Mr. Baker based upon unpopular decisions and political reasons."

Over the last couple of months, a sense of uneasiness has surrounded the superintendent's position.

Christopher Trickett, principal of Wilson High School, had this to say about Baker stepping down: "It's definitely a distraction to our district, but I love this community, and I have confidence in our personnel to step up."

In an email, Cindy Mierzejewski, assistant superintendent, declined to comment, citing "the timing of the continuing events."

Ehrlich also declined to comment for this story.

Meanwhile, students just hope for normalcy to be restored.

Trickett put the situation into perspective for me when he said, "This is a time when we need to rely on each other. As a district, this forces us to unite around a common cause: providing the best for our kids and community."

Oley Valley students dismayed by longtime murals vanishing



Jennifer Wagner

Junior, Oley valley

After school on Feb. 6, students noticed that a beloved mural in the art and music wing of Oley Valley High School was painted over.

The next morning, many students were shocked and disappointed to see white paint where there once was color. None of the students knew that the wall was going to be painted over.

Elijah Velazquez, a junior at Oley, posted a video on Facebook of the first coat of paint being applied. His video received almost

5,000 views.

"When I saw them painting, I felt very disappointed," Elijah said.

"I had always enjoyed seeing the mural, along with many others," he said. "I was frustrated because it felt like it came out of nowhere and that no students had known of the change that was occurring."

Two administrators, who declined to be named, said that the painting over of the mural was not meant to devalue the arts. The fresh paint is the first step in building the Lynx Gallery, a place to honor the talented students within the district and display every student's contributions, they said.

The new Lynx Gallery is meant to be a focal point for the fine arts program that should be completed by the end of the school year.

Members of the community and students spoke out about



VOICES: JENNIFER WAGNER, JUNIOR AT OLEY VALLEY

Murals in the art wing at Oley Valley High School, dating to 1992, are shown before being painted over. The walls are now white. Officials said it's to make way for the Lynx Gallery, but students miss the murals.

their feelings of discontent in response to Elijah's post.

"I just don't understand why they would take it away when it's been such a huge part of our lives," said Brionna Myers, also a junior. "I really loved the mural, and it won't be the same without the painting I grew up with as a student in the high school."

Art teacher Kitty Wittich was in charge of the murals being put in place.

"The original mural was painted by some of our students and third-generation Pennsylvania German folk artist (Barbara Strawser) in 1992 as a hands-on learning experience for the students," Wittich said.

The first mural was called "The Moon Garden."

"In 1997 it was followed by 'The Sun Garden,' and then 'The Water Garden (was done) in the early 2010s,'" Wittich said.