

Michigan House Education Committee Hearing on Bill 6004, Nov. 16, 2012
Presented by Mary T. Wood, citizen advocate for public education
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APPOINTMENT OF CHANCELLOR COVINGTON

The first meeting of the Executive Board of the Education Achieve Authority was on **August 11, 2011**. The yearly board meeting calendar was approved to consist of 4 quarterly meetings regardless that this was the first year for this entity to exist. This meet that "special meetings" would be called as needed giving the public minimum notice.

Not on the agenda, but stated during the Chairperson's Remarks was the need for the appointment of a chancellor. It reads in the minutes " Member Pickard asked whether there was a timeline for an appointment of the Chancellor. Chairperson Roberts indicated that this needs to happen soon since there is a tremendous amount of work to do. He noted that systems need to developed and a war room with all initiatives established and made accessible to the public. Member Murray asked whether the appointment would be made in consult with the full EAA Board, and Chairperson Roberts indicated the the Board needs to be part of the appointment process."

Fifteen days later a Special meeting was called.

August 26, 2011 (Friday) Special Meeting of the EAA Executive Committee
3 members present, 2 absent

The agenda includes

- 1) Approval of Aug. 14, 2011 Special Meeting minutes (which did not happen)
- 2) Conflict of Interest and Disclosure Forms
- 3) Request for Closed Session
- 4) Chancellor Interview
- 5) Public Comment
- 6) EAA Executive Committee Action Item

I would like to share with you in my testimony items #3, #4 and #6 of the Aug. 26, 2011 EAA Executive Committee meeting minutes. Here are the comments lifted directly off the meeting minutes.

#3) "Chairperson Roberts also provided some background in terms of how the EAA Executive Committee arrived at the candidate application before them. The search process underway at DPS to fill the vacant Superintendent of Schools position and determination by the EAA that a Chancellor would be needed to lead the organization happened simutaneously. **The five strong candidates identified on the search process were not interested in the Superintendent role but were, in fact, interested in the Chancellor role.** These candidates expressed their desire to have their applications remain confidential. And all but one had voluntarily withdrawn by the time of the meeting. Chairperson Roberts remarked the the remaining candidate stood out above all the others and has a history of innovating, of thinking outside the box and has the creativity necessary to get the job done here in Detroit."

At 3:20 the committee went into closed session to discuss the application. They returned at 4:02.

#4) Dr. John Covington was asked to come forward to be interviewed by the Executive Committee. Chairperson Roberts publicly shared some background information on Dr. Covington. The minutes contain a one page narrative summation of questions and answers asked of Dr. Covington by the 3 EAA

members present.

#6) Chairperson Roberts described a draft contract for Dr. Covington anticipation of a vote to approve him as Chancellor. The competitive package was modeled on Dr. Covington's contract in Kansas City.

A motion and vote taken to approve Dr. Covington as Chancellor.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:55. So the interview process, public comments by 2 citizens and the discussion of the contract and motion to approve took a total of 53 mins.

I have included in my testimony a copy of a news article from the Huffington Post dated Sept. 1, 2011. "John Covington Faces Questions From Kansas City Residents As He Heads to Detroit."

I have highlighted several passages below.

"But some people in Kansas City, Missouri, who feel betrayed by Covington's sudden departure from his post as superintendent there, say that he hasn't entirely proven himself - - and that Michigan's public display, which included a flattering livestreamed interview with Covington, was largely hype.

"Dr. Covington made quite a few changes in a short amount of time," said Kansas City school board member Ray Wilson. "But outside of balancing the budget, none of the other things, especially student achievement, have showed."

Wilson said he was surprised that Covington had been hired so quickly in Michigan, apparently without being thoroughly vetted. "No one reached out for any kind of background," he said. "It seems like they just took the person at his word."

"(The EAA board) didn't ask him about any challenges he faced in Kansas City, at least not publicly," said Yael Abouhalkah, a Kansas City Star columnist and editorial board member who has closely followed Covington's tenure and resignation.

Kansas City residents were stunned when Covington surfaced in Detroit two days after his resignation for an interview: the man they saw as their wronged leader was forsaking them to accept a more visible and better paying job.

Covington said he didn't seek out the job. When a headhunting firm contacted him, he said he at first waved them off. Then, after some thought about Detroit challenges - - and how it was a "unique opportunity...building from the ground up a system that would truly transform public education"- - he said he became interested again. He formally submitted his application for the post last Monday.

In summary, let me point out a few items.

Dr. Covington submitted his application on Monday. Resigned from Kansas City schools on Wednesday and on Friday of that same week shows up in Detroit at a EAA meeting. His application is presented to the EAA Executive Board by Chairman Roberts, he is interviewed and hired by only 3 EAA members with a contract based on his Kansas City contract, already drafted prior to the meeting. This is not a selection process that I would had expected for such an important position!

Respectfully, Mary T. Wood

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John Covington Faces Questions From Kansas City Residents As He Heads To Detroit



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When appointing John Covington chancellor of Michigan's Education Achievement System, a plan to transform low-performing schools that will pilot in Detroit before expanding statewide, Gov. Rick Snyder (R) signaled his reliance on the new chief to help rescue the state's most distressed students.

"The future of Detroit and Michigan depends on making our education system a success," Michigan Governor Rick Snyder (R) said Friday, announcing Covington's hire. "Dr. Covington's record of achievement is just the right fit to ensure that our children get the education they so richly need."

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has previously referred to Detroit as "ground zero" in education reform. On Wednesday, he sang Covington's praises. "He's deeply committed," Duncan told the Detroit Free Press. "When you need dramatic change, you have to have that kind of leader."

But some people in Kansas City, Missouri, who feel betrayed by Covington's sudden departure from his post as superintendent there, say that he hasn't entirely proven himself -- and that Michigan's public display, which included a flattering livestreamed interview with Covington, was largely hype.

"Dr. Covington made quite a few changes in a short amount of time," said Kansas City school board member Ray Wilson. "But outside of balancing the budget, none of the other things, especially student achievement, have showed."

Wilson said he was surprised that Covington had been hired so quickly in Michigan, apparently without being thoroughly vetted. "No one reached out for any kind of background," he said. "It seems like they just took the person at his word."

"[The EAS board] didn't ask him about any of the challenges he faced in Kansas City, at least not publicly," said Yael Abouhalkah, a Kansas City Star columnist and editorial board member who has closely followed Covington's tenure and resignation.

Sara Wurfel, a spokesperson for Snyder, defended Covington's selection process. "His track record overall is fantastic and exactly what DPS needs," she said.

Covington, who has been hesitant to comment publicly since accepting the job in Detroit, says he has no regrets about his tenure in Kansas City. "Because of the work that we were able to do, we are much further along," Covington told The Huffington Post in a Wednesday interview. "I don't think that anyone can argue with the fact that our schools today are tremendously better off than they were when we first arrived two years ago."

Last week, Covington abruptly resigned from his Kansas City post in a contentious episode that included allegations of malfeasance against then-school board president Airick West. At the time, Covington did not spell out his reasons for resigning. Kansas City leaders embarked on an effort to keep Covington, calling on West to resign.

The departure led some to express concerns that the Kansas City Schools District, which was already only provisionally accredited, might be viewed as unstable and would perhaps be subject to a state takeover.

Chris Nicastro, Missouri commissioner of education, told The Huffington Post that those concerns were warranted, adding that the state could potentially take control of Kansas City's schools in 2014. "We have had concerns about the stability of their leadership and superintendency," she said. "Those concerns have resurfaced now with the resignation."

Kansas City residents were stunned when Covington surfaced in Detroit two days after his resignation for an interview: the man they saw as their wronged leader was forsaking them to accept a more visible and better-paying job. The Michigan EAS is expected to begin by operating between 30 and 40 schools in Detroit, a city brought to its knees by the recession with \$327 million in school system debt, low graduation rates and ever-dwindling enrollment. *RESIGNED ON WED. TO KC INTERVIEWED ON FRIDAY BY EAA*

"This is a betrayal to the students and parents of this district," said Gwendolyn Grant, president of the Kansas City Urban League Grant, who pushed hard for West's departure and for Covington to withdraw his resignation. (West resigned as school board president Monday but remained on the board.) Covington remained silent about his motives throughout, Grant said, leaving his supporters feeling duped once news of his move came to light. "We tried to hold his [West's] feet to the fire only to learn that Covington was disingenuous from the beginning."

In Kansas City, Covington enjoyed wide support from a community who looked to him to overhaul their distressed schools. Covington closed half the city's schools and fired administrative staff. He balanced the budget, ended thousands of vendor contracts, shifted seventh and eighth grades into high schools, piloted an approach that eliminates grade levels in some schools and rewrote curricula.

After initially expressing concern, Kansas City residents largely embraced Covington's controversial plan. They were so impressed with him, in fact, that they brushed off a dip in test scores this year, describing it as a natural consequence of the large-scale shakeup.

Covington, for his part, defended the drop. "Any time you have that kind of monumental change over a short period of time, that kind of dip is predictable," he said, pointing to gains he had made the year before.

Now that he has left, though, Covington's former supporters are less forgiving, suggesting that he didn't stay put for long enough to see his plans through.

"Our assessment program scores had taken a dip and they were already low," Wilson said. "He didn't give the turnaround plan time to pan out."

It is unclear how his record and the fallout from his sudden departure will read in Detroit, a city equally in need of competent educational leadership. Few Detroiters interviewed knew much about Covington beside the positive information the state and district shared with them.

When Harvey Santana, a Democratic state representative whose district includes Detroit, learned more about Covington's record, he said he was skeptical of his ability to fix anything.

"This is a guy who is coming from a distressed school district where he didn't have a great track record," Santana said. "Now he's coming to manage a bunch of schools with horrible track records. I don't see how you make the two connect, how you improve them."

Grant argued that Covington's departure from Kansas City mars his credibility in Detroit. "Kansas City was a career stepping stone for him," she said. "If you would abruptly leave Kansas City, why would you not abruptly leave Detroit?"

Covington signed a four-year contract and said he plans to stay in Michigan "for a long time." Yet his contract contains a clause that says it can be terminated "upon resignation or retirement of the chancellor."

The saga speaks to a chronic problem in urban education: the perpetually revolving door of leaders. The average urban superintendent stays put for less than three years. Including Covington, Kansas City has now cycled through seven since 1999.

A similar revolving door in Detroit has espoused distrust among educators there. "We've seen one person after another like that come in over the last ten years," said Detroit teacher Nicole Conaway.

Covington said he didn't seek out the job. When a headhunting firm contacted him, he said, he at first waved them off. Then, after some more thought about Detroit's challenges -- and how it was a "unique opportunity ... building from the ground up a system that would truly transform public education" -- he said he became interested again. He formally submitted his application for the post last Monday. *THEN RESIGNED ON WED. GOT EAA CHANCELLOR ON FRIDAY.*

"A lot of what is being said about me now is based on emotion, rather than genuine feelings that I haven't served them well," Covington said. "Most people would honestly say that 'yeah, he served well.' While they were not ready for me to go, it was time to move on."

At a recent public meeting, Covington told Kansas City residents that 2011-2012 was going to be a "banner year" for its schools, a remark some now feel was disingenuous.

"When I saw him in Detroit on Friday, I thought, what a jerk," Abouhalkah said. "For him to say it's a banner year and just go is leaving kids in the lurch."

But Covington doesn't see the contradiction. Kansas City has since appointed his chief of staff Chace Ramey as superintendent, and aims to stick with the plan for now. "When they hire a new superintendent, there is no reason to start over again, because the plan is in place," Covington said. "You can take the plan and move us forward -- that hasn't changed. This can still be a banner year for Kansas City Schools."