

Statement from East Lansing Public Schools Trustee Nichole Martin and responses received by ELi, January 17-20, 2020, following on [this article](#) which covered the “ousting” of Nichole Martin from her executive position on the Board:

From Nichole Martin, ELPS Trustee (formerly Vice President)

In an attempt to make sure my words are reflective of my own decision to vote no against this week's proposed slate of executive officers, I will provide my response to Alice [Dreger of East Lansing Info] here. Alice, you do not have to feel wedged into paraphrasing my words and I don't have to worry about the being misleading.

Thank you, Alice, for your inquiry regarding Monday's meeting, the election of officer positions and my vote against the slate that was presented. I believe that the spirit of democracy has totally been lost amongst the East Lansing Board of Education. It would be impossible to think that individual conversations did not take place prior Monday's meeting when a potential slate of board member names are proposed in mere seconds of a request for a motion for officer positions.

It is my understanding that individual conversations were had with each member of the board, and that I was the last one to become privy to the “unofficial slate” that was presented. In a true democracy, members of the board would openly and honestly have to be nominated at the board table. They would talk about why they would like to fill the role off and could serve in an executive roll on the Board of Education.

Last January, I was also not “slated” to be the Vice President but when the unofficial slate had been presented via email, I felt the need to address why a brand new board member would fill such a role when there were senior members who had plenty to give in such a role who had not been provided an opportunity to serve in this capacity. I felt like roles should have been discussed publicly then but they were not and onward we went. When it came time for committees, I was appointed again to the Policy committee, of which I have been a committee member the previous two years but was not appointed as the chair, instead the newest member of our team was provided with this opportunity.

Early last spring, during a presentation to the board, I asked a couple of questions of student advocates that were deemed inappropriate by members of the board, staff and students. I inquired about resources of mental health statistics that had been provided. My inquiry caused quite a stir and resulted in the drafting a proposed board apology letter for the way the students had been treated. I did not sign that letter. If I was the person to have offended someone or a group of people, why would an entire board have to apology to the people they did not offend. I did not believe it was their apology to give and I certainly was not going to sign an apology that was not mine. As a result, at my request, I met with administrators and teachers, then with students, so I could hear from directly from those who were affected by my inquiry. I rearranged my work scheduled to meet administrators, staff and students during times they were scheduled to be at school. After meeting with them, I had a clearer understanding of how I had offended each one and as a result chose to write an individual apology letter to each person I had met with and I sent them off to the school. Shortly after this

incident, it was decided there was no longer a need for a Board Liaison to the Mental Health Advisory Committee. Guess who that was...yup it was me. A board liaison position that was identified as a need, in a board approved resolution that was drafted and passed. Suddenly that position was no longer needed, and it was presented as though it were to align with the Sex Education Advisory Board.

Now we find ourselves looking at a new year, newly elected officials and rearrangement of committees. I voted no against a proposed slate I believe was obtained in a way that was convenient. I may be in a political role as a school board member, but I am not a politician. There was no need for anyone to lobby for or against anything different than what was presented because that slate worked well to meet the needs of others. I could have said something when asked if there was any discussion but that would have been uncomfortable for those in the room. I could have held the discussion long enough to buy time for Trustee Henderson to arrive. The board had been provided with information not only once that Trustee Henderson was on her way but a second time that she was in the building and there were no pressing agenda items that could not have allowed for the meeting to start a couple minutes behind in order to have the full board present for the voting in of officers. Action was taken to start the meeting at 7:00pm on the dot and officers were voted in at 7:03pm, respectively.

So what's next? Well the committee assignments have come out, and surprise, surprise not only am I not the chair of the Policy committee, but I have been taken off it all together. The fall out of my "No" vote, is that despite my worth and value seen by those who elected me, my involvement in the last three years of policy would be best suited this year by joining the intergovernmental committee.

The intent of this detailed response is to provide a better understanding regarding my refusal to jeopardize my integrity regardless of how people, and their perceived power, think of me. So, tasks and opportunities can continue to be taken away from me. I am still one seventh of a voting board and I will continue to I refuse to vote for things that lack any sense of integrity. I am one seventh regardless of any officer role.

As members of the East Lansing Board of Education, our primary functions as the governing body are to uphold legislative standards and update policy to support those standards, approve educational materials presented by our staff who are the subject matter experts, support the Superintendent in adhering her agreed upon goals and the goals of her administrative staff, monitor and make budget decisions (approvals) as recommended to our Director of Finance, oversee school facilities, serve as needed when disciplinary action requires us and communicating with the public. All of which can be found under Board Policy 1032 Power and Duties.

The roles of the executive board positions can be found in Board Policy 1150 – Board Officers. I do not need the title of an executive board position to uphold my duties to the community.

[See below for responses received]

Response received from Erin Graham, ELPS Board President (past and present):

Trustee Martin has every right to express her opinion. She is welcome to do so at the board table or on social media. Since Trustee Martin's statement has/will be published, I will address some of the issues she has raised about which constituents may have questions.

The will of the Board is represented by the action taken by the Board at the board table. All board members have a vote at the table, and there is an opportunity for any board member to discuss action items before the president calls for a vote. In advance of a meeting, any board member is welcome to contact any other board member to discuss matters pertaining to the Board so long as there are no Open Meetings Act violations.

Part of the role of the president of the Board is to assign members to committees. As the current president of the Board of Education, I have made it my practice to ask members' preferences and to try to assure that all members have the opportunity to serve the district in at least one of the ways they have requested. When more than three members ask to join a particular committee, decisions must be made about who will serve on the committee as we cannot have a quorum of board members (4 or more) serve on a committee. The longevity of a board member is not the sole determining factor used when assigning people to committees, to chair committees, or to serve as a liaison. I have never assigned a member to a committee as retribution for how they vote on issues that come before the Board. All committee assignments are made with the best interests of the district and students in mind, in conjunction with expressed board member interests.

Last year and this year, I asked Dr. Chambers to chair the Policy Committee because she is a preeminent scholar in educational policy. She was not the newest member of the Board nor was she the newest member of the Policy Committee. She has a PhD in Educational Policy, is the current president of the University Council for Educational Administration, a national organization, and has served as a doctoral advisor and professor to many educational leaders around the country. I would direct any who would question this decision to her long, extensive, and impressive CV: <http://education.msu.edu/faculty/venzant-chambers/venzant-chambers-cv.pdf> (from 2017). We are incredibly fortunate in ELPS to have somebody who is so well versed in educational policy to lead our policy committee.

Last year, students from East Lansing High School coordinated a fabulous professional development (PD) for our staff at ELHS. About fifty students showed up early, at 7:30 a.m., on a late start day to share their experiences in school and to offer staff potential solutions, from their student perspectives, to address some of the unique challenges they faced in school because of their race, socioeconomic class, religion, gender and/or sexuality, or mental health. Board members and administrators heard from many teachers that this student-led PD was one of the best professional developments ever to be offered, and we afterwards invited a couple of student leaders to share with the full Board what this PD entailed. The way the students were treated in the Board Room on April 22nd was not reflective of how we want any of our presenters, especially our students, to be treated. On May 6th, six board members signed an apology to the students. At the subsequent meeting, the Board adopted Board Meeting Protocols in an effort to assure a positive and constructive environment for all of our presenters

moving forward, and all Board Members have had positive interactions with presenters since this time.

Trustee Martin continues to be a valued member of the Board, and I trust that she will serve the district well as the Chair of Facilities Committee, as Liaison to the Ingham School Officers Association (ISOA), and as a member of the Intergovernmental Committee.

Response received from Kath Edsall, ELPS Board Treasurer (past and present):

Reflecting upon my strengths and desires, I have only ever desired to hold the position of Treasurer. As in past years, I shared that desire with other board members who in turn, individually, shared their desires for the year. With that information, as well as my personal feelings about how best the community would be served, I crafted my motion. My motion was the entry for further discussion. Discussion can not happen without a motion on the table. Once the motion was read, the board President asked for discussion. If any board member disagreed with the “slate” I proposed, that was the time to go public with his/her concerns. My motion could have been amended to remove any candidate if that was agreed upon by a majority. Similarly, the board could have rejected my motion and another motion to approve a different “slate” or to choose position by position could have been offered. Because I am the most awesome person at knowing who should hold which position, my slate was supported by the majority.

Response received from Terah Chambers, ELPS Board Vice President (formerly Secretary):

I am proud to serve East Lansing schools. In that capacity, I have only acted and will only act in ways that I believe support our students, teachers, and community. I am thrilled with what my colleagues and I have achieved and look forward to what we might accomplish in the coming year. Serving children has not only been at the center of my role on the school board, but drives what I see as my responsibility as a professor of education at MSU. I would never compromise those commitments for political gain.

Thanks for providing an opportunity to respond.

Response received from Chris Martin, ELPS Board Secretary (as of Jan. 2020):

Our School Board is a body of individuals with distinct experiences, voices, and opinions. When differences arise, my experience has been that my colleagues go out of their way to build consensus in a thoughtful and inclusive way. The overwhelming majority of our votes are unanimous.

All of us are happy to serve the District and eager to take our turns in leadership roles. Regardless of titles and committee assignments, we all have the same vote and same responsibility to the people who count on East Lansing Public Schools.

I have been impressed by the contributions of our Board members to our District's success over the past year. I am excited to see what more we can accomplish in 2020.

Response received from Kate Powers, ELPS Trustee:

I can't speak to Nichole's personal experience. Those are hers.

I will say I informed the Chair twice that Trustee Henderson was on her way and was in the building when the meeting started that evening.

Response received from Hillary Henderson, ELPS Trustee:

I understand Nichole's frustration perhaps as well as anyone can. During my 8 years on the board, I've been outvoted, been part of unanimous decisions and I've been the president. My lasting hope is that whomever leads the board in the future can get away from power struggles and meddling in the day to day operations carried out by our dedicated, qualified administration and staff. It's frustrating sometimes, but it continues to be an honor and privilege to serve the East Lansing Public School Community.

[Asked to explain why she came in after the election of officers had happened, and provide Kate Powers' response, Henderson added:]

I was at a home inspection in a nearby neighborhood with a client. I texted Kate Powers to let her know I was in the building and to let the other members know. I walked in to the room at 7:03 pm and the vote had already taken place. I was planning on being a yes vote on the slate.