

King HS Gets New Principal After Tumultuous Week

Local School Council members met on the street outside the school Saturday to vote on a new principal as students protested.

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After months of dissension among parents, students and community members, the Local School Council at Martin Luther King Community College Prep voted Saturday to offer a four-year principal contract to Melanie Beatty-Sevier, current principal of Paul Robeson High School in Englewood. Robeson is slated to close in June.

The vote capped a tumultuous week of meetings marked by student protests, clashes with the police, an apparent boycott when one faction (seven LSC members) didn't show and repeated visits from CPS officials.

In an unusual twist to an ongoing drama, Saturday night's meeting took place in front of the school at the corner of 45th and Drexel. Current principal David Narain denied the LSC's request for meeting space in the school, saying that opening the school on a weekend evening presented a hardship and was meant to exclude the broader community. "It would appear [the LSC] did not want to hold it during the week when people would already be in the building," he told those gathered at the May 7 meeting.

The council's roll call vote offering the contract to Beatty-Sevier was drowned out by cries of "Don't do this!" and students chanting "Whose schools? Our schools!"

The LSC voted in January not to renew Narain's contract, a decision that caused controversy among the parent and student body. A petition to retain him soon garnered nearly 1,000 signatures on Change.org. Parents and students who disagreed with the decision repeatedly disrupted regularly scheduled LSC meetings and special meetings called to contend with the appointment of a new principal.

After a candidate forum May 2, the LSC was set to decide upon the new principal on May 7, but the meeting was halted after students blocked LSC members from entering the meeting room and police were called. The meeting was adjourned without any resolution and rescheduled for May 9. However, only four LSC members (including the principal) attended the May 9 meeting and no vote could be taken due to the lack of quorum. At



A student voices his opinions as local school council chair Kwesi Kuntu records him. Photo by Pat Nabong



Students react as members of the local school council cast their votes. Photo by Pat Nabong



Principal David Narain watches as the local school council votes for the new principal. Photo by Pat Nabong

that meeting, two CPS officials, Chip Johnson, Chief of Family and Community Engagement in Education, and Dr. Guillermo Montes de Oca, director of the Office of Local School Council Relations, addressed the approximately 100 parents, students and teachers who were mostly there in support of Narain and answered questions about the process.

When asked why the CPS or Board of Education would not take action, Johnson responded that the LSC's actions had been investigated and no wrongdoing was found. "You elected them and trusted them with this decision," said Johnson, who also pointed out that the community "changed the paradigm by electing a new council who will hopefully listen to your voices."

The LSC has been criticized for holding the vote on Narain's con-

tract when CPS was still on winter break. Parents and teachers learned of Narain's dismissal via an email from the principal himself, angering some who questioned the timing and transparency of the selection process. Critics of the principal point to declining enrollment over Narain's tenure and an unsatisfactory evaluation last year, as well as controversy surrounding teacher layoffs in 2016. His supporters credit him for King's status as a Level 1 plus school, the highest possible rating in CPS. This resulted in a group of parents and teachers banding together in support of the principal and running as a slate, defeating three of the four sitting LSC members in the April 19 election. However, the new council will not convene until July and the power to hire principals remains with the current LSC members for now.

At the May 9 meeting, Montes de Oca also repeated Johnson's assurance that an investigation into the process did not reveal any irregularities. He told those in attendance that he suggested to the LSC that they "step aside to give this decision to the new council," but they declined. "They feel it's in their authority, and they apparently have an agenda to pursue."

Natasha Dunn, a newly elected LSC member and parent of a sophomore, pointed out that the newly appointed principal oversaw a neighborhood Level Two school, the lowest possible CPS rating, while King is a selective enrollment school with the district's highest rating. She also criticized the current LSC's process: "They didn't do their homework - they didn't interview parents or staff at Robeson, so how do we know what she's like?"

In an attempt to draw parents to the Saturday night meeting, Friends of King High School hosted a last-minute barbecue, lending a festive atmosphere leading up to the vote. The music stopped abruptly when LSC members appeared and called the meeting to order, amid shouting and chanting. The meeting lasted about 30 minutes with the police appearing once again as students blocked the street after the meeting adjourned.

Narain has taken the matter to an independent arbitrator, who will meet with both Narain and the LSC and determine whether there was just cause for not extending his contract, a process which could take months.

City Bureau reporter Amanda Tugade contributed reporting.

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