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Dear Counseling DH's:

Please take the time to read this email as it is my attempt to recognize the quandary you are in with open houses beginning, mixed messaging with middle schools and counselors, and the general and overall concern about what is happening. I also realize that many of you have relationships with these schools and their counselors, and not having a definitive plan to offer them is worse than frustrating, it's perhaps not professional. I believe that leadership is setting the stage for other to succeed. I take ownership in not putting you all in the situation to do so.

I understand this appears to be another one of those things where it seems like folks in charge do not have a plan. That is in fact somewhat true. Let's call it like it is. We are in a tricky spot with our admissions and how we meet the vision of district, navigate the tremendous costs that come with our ballooning special education population, and most notably, make the necessary changes to our admissions that will help stop the unsustainable level of admitting students that have significant disciplinary histories, require nurses/paras/behavioral therapists, and so on.

Please do not misunderstand me. We all have a favorite kid who is special education. Many of them do not need services and do not need significant accommodations. They are successful in our schools and participating citizens after graduation, employable, and doing well. But let's go with the facts. In 2019 our district had 1235 special education students. Today we have 1950. This past year I reinstated the safety review board, which by our current numbers, right or wrong, has disenrolled a large number of students from our buildings, 73% of which are special education.



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I have had numerous meetings with Commissioner Russell-Tucker, her team of advisors, and special education lawyers. The state believes we are in violation of federal laws by continuing on with the safety review board. I was able to buy us a year, but if I didn't, we would have over 2100 special education students in our schools, with no increases in funding to support our teachers, and especially you, the counselors, who often are on the front lines with families and these high need students.

The state is (thankfully) willing to invest 200 million into a brand-new Bullard Havens, but we continue to struggle with getting the funding for these other high need areas. We will no longer, after this year, be allowed to use the safety review committee. If we do, the state will sue us. That is a real fact, which led us to believe that the lottery was our best bet. A lottery with preferences that we could control to help set up our schools with the right kids, who are with us for the right reasons, and under conditions that set our teachers up for success. There are ideas such as sibling and alumni preference, setting limits on enrollment for neighborhoods, middle schools, and towns. We also looked at a model from Massachusetts for a "qualified lottery," where certain qualifications got you into a first-round lottery, with 50% of enrollment coming from that. The next 50% would be based on how we do it now.

The lottery was well thought out and I have been selling it for months. However, once we made it official, everywhere I went I was asked about it. Rescinding it yesterday was a result of feedback, industry concerns, confusion, worry, and simply put, a lack of clear direction that I could not stand behind as your Superintendent. When I realized I was perhaps driving the wrong bus, I consulted with Dr. Solek



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away. I at least understood the longer we stayed , the costlier the ticket back would be. I still think under the right condition this can work for us in the future.

So, I ask for patience as we recalibrate. I will not leave you guessing for long, but we are back in the lab trying to figure what is best, at least for this school year, while we develop an exploratory team that will get us ready for next school year. Just for you all to know, people always ask why we cannot use grades or behavior as metrics within the admissions system. It is because in 2018, the Department of Justice did a CTECS admissions audit and it found those metrics to be inequitable. This report is also the reason why everything is centralized now. The problem is, even under the current centralized system, grading and scoring is still inequitable, unfair, perhaps arbitrary, and most notably, easily manipulated by schools and families that have the understanding to do so.

Again, I am sorry that we are well into October and recruiting season, with so many questions that remain. We will have a final direction for you next week. In the meantime, you should state that CTECS will not be running a lottery for the class of 2029, prepare families for what can be controlled and information about what we have done in the past, and inform counselors at Middle Schools that we are actively reviewing our process and will push something out by [Friday, October 18](#).

Thank you for taking the time to read this. I hope you find it to be informative and as transparent as possible.

Justin Lowe, Ed.D.
Interim Superintendent



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