



# Report to the Board of Trustees and the Community - Superintendent Hiring and Oversight

BURNT RANCH SCHOOL DISTRICT 2021-22

Joshua McKnight | Board President | February 2022

## SUMMARY

This report summarizes the recruitment and employment of the Burnt Ranch School District's most recent superintendent, Bryan Caples. The Board of Trustees has received many inquiries from staff and community members about his short tenure at Burnt Ranch. The Board wishes to illuminate the hiring process, to inform the community about the circumstances of Caples' employment, to reflect on the Board's oversight role, and to draw conclusions about needed improvements in the recruitment, management, and oversight of the District's leadership team.

While many aspects of personnel matters are confidential, much about public employment is a matter of public concern and a matter of public record. Accountability for the use of taxpayer funds is critical. Therefore, this report examines publicly available information about the hiring process, terms of employment, work expectations, attendance by Caples, and the termination of Caples' employment.

Caples was employed by the District via an employment contract with a one-year term spanning July 2021 to June 2022. It called for 126 workdays and provided a base salary of \$60,000, plus a partial contribution to the purchase of health and welfare benefits. The work expectations were for three days of work each week during the instructional year, with at least two of them on-site at the District.

The Board of Trustees began to experience frustration and concerns with Caples' attendance and fulfillment of basic duties. The situation did not improve, and after oversight and direction, the District terminated Caples' employment without cause on January 13, 2022.

Overall, the lessons learned are:

- Like many small and rural school districts, Burnt Ranch has difficulty attracting and retaining high-quality staff. The remaining staff are hard-working and dedicated to our pupils' well-being and achievement.
- During the recruitment process for leadership positions, the Board of Trustees needs to engage in more probing discussions with former employers and job references to ensure that candidates have a successful track record and are suited to the unique demands of leading a small, rural school district.
- Contract with Superintendent should be more specific to the job duties, and contain provisions in the event that work is not being performed.
- Even when expectations are communicated to a Superintendent, when they are not met it takes time for volunteer Board members to get traction and engage in detailed and meaningful oversight. Board oversight should be more detailed and woven into the Board's calendar each school year. Early performance evaluations and a defined schedule for meeting with the Board of Trustees to discuss progress on goals will help keep a leader on schedule and accountable.

## RECRUITMENT PROCESS

Moving forward, the Board should strengthen its review of candidates' work history, preferably by speaking with board members at multiple prior employers. The focus of these inquiries should be whether the candidate possesses the technical skills and social-emotional intelligence to lead a school district. In particular, why would a candidate be successful at a small, rural school district like Burnt Ranch?

## ATTENDANCE CONCERNS

Despite the District's in-person instructional model, Caples was physically present on campus *only once* during the entire the term of his employment, prior to the start of the 2021-22 school year. Caples was not present on campus at any other time during the school year, nor did he perform required administrative duties or reporting. In fact, Caples never picked up his set of keys to the District's facilities. Part of this time was attributable to an authorized leave of absence, however, the majority of absences from on-site work were unauthorized. Caples also did not attend any Board of Trustees meetings, even remotely, from August 2021 through December 22, 2021.

The Board learned from this experience that early, detailed, and more specific directions about work expectations were needed. These efforts occurred but should have taken place earlier and in more detail.

## ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

Given its small size, the District does not have other administrators who can readily perform the functions of a superintendent, or that of a chief business official. Ensuring that basic governance functions continue in the absence of one staff member is critical.

Caples did not prepare or oversee preparation of required reports and budget documents during the period July 2021 to January 2022 such as the first interim budget report (due on December 15), as well as many other routine reports and communications. Required reports and budgetary matters were handled and completed by staff, Teacher/Principal Kristi Holland-Kilgore and Business Manager Robin Dummer. Ms. Holland-Kilgore is a full-time teacher and part-time principal for the District and possesses a preliminary Administrative Services Credential. In addition, in October 2021, the Board extended to retired Superintendent Kathleen Graham a limited employment contract to assist the District in Caples' absence. The Board wishes to extend sincere thanks to all staff for their hard work and perseverance, but especially Ms. Holland-Kilgore, Ms. Dummer, and Ms. Graham.

Lessons learned include:

- The Board and District should discuss and refine the duties and roles of superintendent, principal, and teacher-in-charge in order to ensure that required governance functions can be completed when one staff member is absent. This occurred on an ad-hoc basis during the fall semester of 2021 and staff filled in admirably, but the Board should explore whether addressing these contingencies can be more clearly delineated in staff roles.
- Other contingency staffing ideas can be discussed with the Trinity County Office of Education. TCOE has been a great partner and provides assistance in many forms to Burnt Ranch. Burnt Ranch should explore with TCOE options for sharing administrative services with other nearby school districts, or contracting with TCOE for some administrative services.

## CONDUCT AND CULTURE

As the Board exercised its oversight role, unfortunately Caples' conduct in response was inconsistent with the expectations of a District leader and staff member. Caples' communications to the Board and others in his role as Superintendent included correspondence and statements the Board deemed discourteous, unprofessional, and which did not reflect the values of the District. The District reaffirms its commitment to ensuring that the school community is respectful, welcoming, inclusive, and safe. District staff and leaders must model and champion these values. Future conduct from school leaders not aligning with these expectations will be prevented and, where necessary, corrected.

## DISTRICT PROPERTY

Caples was issued a District laptop computer upon hire. On January 14, 2022, Caples was directed to return the District's laptop computer and any other District property in his possession no later than January 21, but did not do so. As a small school district, the District has limited resources and each piece of equipment is impactful. The District is currently exploring its legal options to recover its property.

## CONCLUSION

The Board of Trustees terminated Caples' employment on January 13, 2022. The Board hopes that the lessons learned from this experience can be applied in a positive manner to the hiring and oversight of future Burnt Ranch School District leaders.