

E-mails reveal internal struggles over Wright Tech

By Brian Lockhart, Investigative Reporter

Published: 11:59 p.m., Sunday, January 31, 2010

As students and faculty at [J.M. Wright Technical High School](#) in Stamford were awaiting word on classes resuming, state officials were playing a bureaucratic game of "hot potato" behind the scenes over how to close the school and who should be accountable.

That debate, revealed in 2009 e-mails obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request from Republican Gov. [M. Jodi Rell](#)'s budget office, the state [Department of Education](#) and the Connecticut [Board of Education](#), has raised additional questions about whether regulations were broken when the education commissioner suspended operations at Wright Tech a month before the Aug. 27 opening day.

Some say how the school was closed could be the key to ensuring it is reopened.

"I think the Stamford delegation's contention this was tantamount to an illegal closure has a lot of merit," said Sen. [Thomas Gaffey](#), D-Meriden, co-chairman of the Legislature's [Education Committee](#).

The topic is likely to be discussed Monday at the Capitol during Gaffey's previously scheduled informational forum about challenges facing Connecticut's vocational and technical schools.

Wright Tech supporters say they hope state Attorney General [Richard Blumenthal](#) will review the new information. Blumenthal's office recently launched an ongoing review of the Wright Tech closure at the request of legislative leaders and Stamford lawmakers.

Sen [Andrew McDonald](#) and Rep. [Gerald Fox](#), both D-Stamford, said they believe that if Blumenthal determines a school board vote was required, it will force the state to fast-track a reopening during tough fiscal times.

"It can force the state Department of Education to reopen the school in 2011," Fox said.

Though the state has formed a committee to plan for a revitalized Wright Tech with a new curriculum, there is no guarantee funding will be available.

"We're still in a very difficult budget situation -- one that everyone agrees will persist for several years," said [Jeffrey Beckham](#), spokesman for Rell's budget office.

Advertisement



Providence Contractors

No more headaches! First-rate contractors contact you: up to 4 bids. Bed, bath, basement, pool—FREE! [Learn more](#)



Are You Unemployed?

Use Obama's Education Stimulus & Earn a Degree Online! [Learn more](#)

 [Add Your Link Here!](#)

McDonald said the general public should be concerned with what he believes was a cowardly process to close a school.

Even if Blumenthal finds the school board did follow the law, McDonald said the Legislature should clarify the rules governing school closures.

"People need to understand what happened in Stamford to know it could happen in their communities as well," he said.

Why Wright Tech Closed

Wright Tech, built on donated city land to educate 700 students, struggled with declining enrollment for several years. State officials sought to bolster the school's prospects with promised renovations, potential partnerships with [Norwalk Community College](#) and a principal hired in 2008.

Then the budget crisis hit.

At its Dec. 3, 2008, meeting in Hartford, the state school board, responding to a request from the Rell administration for suggested budget cuts, reluctantly adopted a resolution that included suspending operations at Wright Tech.

The language urged the governor to keep the school open.

The resolution stated suspending operations at Wright Tech was "the least harmful option," but would "deprive students in the Stamford area of a promising alternative high school model that has been received with considerable enthusiasm in the Stamford community."

Rell initially did not accept the idea. Her initial 2009-10/2010-11 budget proposal from February 2009 instead created a new statewide middle college system by merging technical high schools such as Wright Tech with neighboring state community colleges, including [Norwalk Community College](#).

When that went nowhere with the Democratic-majority [General Assembly](#), the governor called for the shuttering of Wright Tech in late May.

As the budget stalemate dragged on through the summer, legislative [Democrats](#) pledged to fund Wright Tech even as teachers fearing closure began transferring to other schools.

With the school year looming and no budget deal in sight, school board Chairman [Allan Taylor](#) told Hearst Connecticut Newspapers on July 28, "It doesn't look at all likely they will be going to school at Wright."

The following day, Education Commissioner [Mark McQuillan](#) formally announced a two-year suspension of operations "to establish a viable, long-term plan that will enable (us) to once again serve the needs of the greater Stamford region."

The Board of Ed's Role

For months, Stamford's bipartisan legislative delegation attempted several maneuvers to force the state to keep Wright Tech open.

When those failed, lawmakers, skeptical the Rell administration and education officials truly intended to relaunch Wright Tech in two years, turned their attention to trying to guarantee it would happen.

Their skepticism appears warranted.

A July 24 e-mail between staff in Rell's budget office states, "If Wright Tech is not truly closed, the state will lose a potentially lucrative opportunity to market the property to a private developer."

After McQuillan's July 29 announcement, McDonald questioned why the decision to shutter Wright Tech had not been put to a vote before the state Board of Education.

Taylor at the time argued a vote was unnecessary because the budget resolution the board passed in December 2008 authorized McQuillan to implement suggested budget cuts.

McDonald argues that is not a reasonable interpretation of what the board did, saying the resolution as worded opposes a closure.

"In my opinion, (McQuillan) acted without legal authority to close the school, and he failed to obtain the necessary approvals before taking his unilateral action," McDonald said.

The board was offered at least one additional chance to meet and reconsider Wright Tech's future by McQuillan, who, according to e-mails from spring 2009, was preparing to again pitch the school's closure to the Rell administration.

In an internal April 13 memo updating school board members on the budget process and the need to find additional cuts, McQuillan said he was organizing a meeting with Lt. Gov. [Michael Fedele](#), of Stamford, "to revisit our reasons for proposing to close J.M. Wright."

"The State Department of Education will opt again to close J.M. Wright High School," McQuillan wrote. "Given the last response to such a recommendation from the governor's office, I want to be sure that from the board's perspective making this recommendation again is a sensible and realistic step."

McQuillan asked whether members should meet to discuss the issues, "or are you comfortable letting the process I've established be sufficient?"

Taylor wrote back that the memo "will seem too sketchy. " I think most members will want more information about what's in the set of proposals."

He did not suggest the board convene.

Subsequent e-mails confirm McQuillan scheduled an April 20 meeting with Fedele, but there is no evidence the full school board gathered before that date to affirm Wright Tech's closure.

The topic, according to meeting minutes, did not come up at the board's next regular meeting May 6, a few weeks before Rell's announcement the school would close.

Mixed Messages

In July 2009, pressure was mounting on state officials to announce whether Wright Tech would reopen Aug. 27.

"We have to make that decision in the next week," [Robert Genuario](#), Rell's budget director, told Hearst Connecticut Newspapers July 18. "Just as a matter of fundamental fairness, if the state's going to go down this road, parents and teachers and others affected are entitled to some notice."

E-mails indicate Taylor sought to clarify the school board's role. He argued the board never formally voted to close Wright Tech and was concerned about leaving that impression.

According to a July 12 e-mail from Taylor to fellow board members, on July 10, McQuillan's office "received an urgent request from Secretary Genuario to confirm in writing the Board's position regarding Wright Tech."

With McQuillan away, Deputy Education Commissioner George Coleman and Taylor drafted a letter they felt reflected the spirit of the school board's December 2008 resolution: "This correspondence confirms the recommendation of the Connecticut State Board of Education that the J.M. Wright Technical School" not be funded."

A later e-mail from Taylor suggests that was not enough for Genuario and the Rell administration.

"I guess the statement we sent over the week before was too cursory or they're trying to assure themselves against a political backlash or something," Taylor wrote.

Work began on a formal two-page letter from Taylor and McQuillan, but Taylor did not want a joint letter to state the Board of Education closed Wright Tech because no vote was held.

"I think any discussion of a conclusion to shut by the state board raises a significant Freedom of Information Act issue, since the board has not taken that public vote. I would certainly need to poll the board," Taylor wrote.

In another e-mail, Taylor insisted: "We haven't decided to close the school. We just decided that if the budget required, the school should be closed. I didn't want to suggest that we had taken the next step (as) a board."

[Kathleen Guay](#), from Rell's budget office, outlined [Taylor's](#) concerns in an e-mail to Genuario and added she also understood that if Taylor convened a board meeting to decide whether to close Wright Tech, "there is a possibility that he would not get a majority of the votes."

"(But) if the board references are stricken from the letter, the letter will place the state Department of Education in the decision seat regarding the Wright Tech closure. I believe this would be misleading," Guay wrote.

On July 24, Genuario shared the draft letter with Rell's chief of staff, M. Lisa Moody, who replied in an e-mail: "Can you please call me? We do not want this draft letter sent."

It never was.

McQuillan explained what happened in an early August e-mail to a fellow board member.

"There was a back and forth with (Rell's budget office) supposedly talking for the governor's office -- read Lisa -- that was going nowhere," Taylor wrote. "We got the word out through my talk with the reporter ... " and from Mark's statement."

Fox said the e-mail exchange proves the board never had a formal "up or down vote" authorizing McQuillan to move forward with suspending operations at Wright Tech.

"I think this proves we had a right to be concerned," Fox said.

A Belated Vote

After McDonald wrote Taylor and McQuillan in mid-August asking whether an official vote was ever taken by the board to shutter Wright Tech, Taylor began crafting a response.

Ronald Harris, a Department of Education attorney, concluded in one e-mail: "The commissioner, consistent with the knowledge of the state board, exercised discretion regarding staffing, management and expenditures based on the budgetary crisis."

And in a draft letter to McDonald, Taylor added McQuillan consulted with him before announcing the closure in July and asked whether a board meeting was necessary.

"I advised that I thought that no meeting would be needed or wanted because the policy had been sent in December and I was aware of no inclination on the board to change that policy," Taylor wrote, adding he consulted with the vice chairman as well.

McDonald said he never received anything from Taylor.

Taylor, at the school board's regular meeting Nov. 4, decided to add to the agenda a resolution supporting McQuillan's decision to close Wright Tech after the fact.

It read: "Whereas questions have been raised as to the appropriateness of or authorization for the commissioner's determination in July 2009 to suspend operations at J.M. Wright for a minimum of two years ... " the state Board of Education approves and ratifies the action of the commissioner."

The resolution, unanimously adopted, outraged Stamford lawmakers.

McDonald said he believes it was a clear admission the board knew it had not followed the proper procedures in closing Wright Tech and was trying to make the issue go away.

"How do you unscramble an egg and put it back in the shell?" he said.

Taylor said last week that he continues to believe the school board did not need to hold a formal vote on Wright Tech's closure.

"But it was just easier to take the vote (in November) than have people devoting hours to figuring that question out," he said.

School board member Beverly Bobroske, an ardent supporter of technical schools, said she is optimistic about Wright Tech's future and believes too much is being made of the closure process.

"I thought we did it the right way," said Bobroske, who questioned the need for passing Taylor's November resolution. "I think they're making a mountain out of a molehill. It wasn't anything done in secret."

But lawmakers argue Wright's closure was dangerously precedent-setting.

"You're a Board of Education. What's the next school you're going to do this to?" Gaffey said. "You do this in a very clouded process, to put it kindly. " The members of this board should be called on the carpet."

McDonald said the last-minute addition of Taylor's resolution to the Nov. 4 agenda was another slap in the face of the public.

"For a school closing, there should have been an announcement that it was being considered. There should have been a public hearing, preferably in Stamford, where members of the board would have had to face parents, community leaders, elected officials," he said. "If you can't look at the people in their eyes and cast your vote with them watching you, then you probably shouldn't cast the vote at all."

Obama Urges Homeowners to Refinance

Rates as low as 3.616% APR!

[SeeRefinanceRates](#)

Obama Approves Credit Card Bill

Find Out if You Qualify For Relief.

[LowerMyBills.com](#)

Ads by Yahoo!