

From: [Missy Barnes](#)
To: [StateBoard_SDE](#)
Subject: Letter about ISAAC renewal
Date: Thursday, May 28, 2020 12:07:36 PM

This letter was sent to the State Board in February, but given ISAAC's upcoming charter renewal, I thought it was important to send it again. This man has had a negative impact on SO MANY students and teachers, that someone should hold him accountable for the way he treated people.

Please accept this letter as a formal complaint against Nicholas Spera, former Principal of the Marine Science Magnet High School (MSMHS) in Groton, CT. This letter is a redaction of accounts from eight teachers who departed MSMHS in 2016 to escape the toxic work environment. This complaint will address Dr. Spera's belittling and bullying of staff, inappropriate relationships with students, and grade tampering. We are hopeful that the outcome of this complaint will be Dr. Spera's removal from education as he should not be allowed to hurt any more children than he already has.

When seven out of the eight of us arrived on campus in the fall of 2013, we could not have been more excited to be a part of the “fish school.” None of us paid attention to the fact that over half the staff had left the school the previous year. We all noticed that while we were so excited to begin our adventure, the teachers who were returning were much less enthusiastic. It wasn't until halfway through the year that we were made aware of Dr. Spera's prior behaviors and subsequent investigation by LEARN where he was instructed to “be nice or face the consequences.” Initially he treated the new teachers with great respect. However, the proverbial honeymoon ended and suddenly, one of us would be in his office facing his screaming at the top of his lungs, using the “F” word like it was nothing. Our infraction might be that we asked a question in front of the faculty that “challenged” his authority. Perhaps we wanted to offer a student some sort of modification; or maybe we had requested consequences for a student whose behavior was unacceptable. These are just a few of the reasons teachers merited a “talking to.”

He described one staff member as having a “menopausal moment” when she questioned him in front of the faculty. He told a teacher that another teacher was “a pussy” and that she should “watch out for him.” He advised one teacher that another teacher would never be full time because he didn't like her. When a teacher applied for a job at another school and asked that Nick not be contacted, he sent a text later that night to the teacher: “Next time you interview for another position, you might want to give me a heads up....I was caught off guard.” When another teacher informed him that she was leaving he actually screamed “ARE YOU F*#\$(# KIDDING ME?” He proceeded to tell her that he could “find more money” to keep her at MSMHS and that he would “find a way” to find stipends that he could get her even if it meant creating them or removing a stipend from someone else.

Dr. Spera was frequently accused of having “favorites” among the students by students, faculty, and even parents. He would count election results alone in his office so that he could ensure his picks made it into the correct spots. He was not quiet about it. He would tell some members of the faculty the day before the election who was going to win. Once he had his student council, he would pull them out of class almost daily for long periods of time.

When a teacher mentioned that they were missing instructional time from an AP class, he proceeded to berate this teacher in front of her students. He would pop into class and take lunch orders for his council members and would buy them Panera to eat in his office with him. These behaviors were the norm. He would text students outside of the school day for a variety of reasons. He would often insert himself into relationships telling students who they should and should not date. He would speak inappropriately about students to faculty members referring to some of them as “losers.” Sadly, there was one occasion where he forced a student to call her parents about a consensual intimate encounter he had learned about, while he listened. The student was so upset, she went to another teacher and cried. But she was one of his favorites and didn’t feel that she could say no.

Dr. Spera was so hyper-focused on results that when there were two students in danger of not graduating with the first graduating class, he pulled certain teachers aside and told them that “the students had to pass.” Passing meant offering extra credit (which would be completed in Dr. Spera's office by pulling the students out of other academic classes) for just those students. Once, we had a high profile athlete whose grades were not where Dr. Spera wanted them to be. He informed several teachers that this student couldn't apply to D1 schools with D's on her transcript. Again, the “extra credit” would be allowed for that single student to raise her grade. He selected his valedictorian and salutatorian by December of each school year (members of his council, usually) so when it came time to grade midterms and finals, he would stand over teachers' shoulders and remind them of the grade the student needed to earn on that particular assessment to maintain his or her class rank. Dr. Spera would speak at a faculty meeting about the anonymous parent surveys that were sent home. He proceeded to tell us which parents made negative comments (he had a friend in IT who could figure out the originating email) so that we would be sure to treat those students appropriately. When staff realized his access to presumed confidential responses, we realized that we were no longer safe to provide honest feedback.

It is very difficult to summarize years of abusive management practices. However, there are two additional items worth noting. Many of us reached out to Eileen Howley and Peter Cummings at LEARN with our concerns. One faculty member went so far as to have a secret meeting with Peter on our behalf because she knew that if Nick found out, he would make her life even more miserable (she was the staff person who initiated contact with LEARN in April 2013). That teacher brought evidence of a toxic work environment, but was told “We can't fire him for being an asshole.” When another teacher emailed Eileen Howley with concerns about Nick, that teacher was summoned to his office and told not to bother going over his head because “I have her in my back pocket. She loves me.” Many of us asked for exit interviews when we left, but none were granted.

I would also encourage you to check out the Facebook post by Whale Tales Two on January 16, 2020 where 826 comments have been made by former students, teachers, and parents outlining even more of his abuse. I do not feel that it is appropriate for me to share their stories with you, but I can assure you that if you take the time to read those comments, the pain that those young people expressed is palpable. No professional educator should ever be subjected to the environment we dubbed the Sperosphere; our love for our students and our kinship with one another sustained us. But it is time for people in positions of

authority, who have a responsibility to us, the parents, and especially the students, to look beneath the surface and question the egregious behavior of Dr. Nicholas Spera and examine LEARN's lack of oversight.

If necessary, we would be happy to speak with you in person. Our reluctance in the past -- most recently with *The Day* article -- is the fear of retribution. Nick Spera is vindictive and we are professionals who love what we do and want to continue our work with young people. One teacher, who refused to go on record admitted, "I don't know why, but he still terrifies me."

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of our concerns.

Respectfully submitted,

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