

State agency had role in Spotsy hire

School Board chair sought help to certify new superintendent

ADELE UPHAUS
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

In its efforts to hire Mark Taylor as superintendent, the Spotsylvania School Board took the unusual step of engaging officials from the state Department of Education in the process.

Leadership at the Virginia Department of Education, including State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jillian Balow, communicated with Spotsylvania School

Board members throughout the hiring process. Such involvement is uncommon, according to a recent former state secretary of education, three former Spotsylvania School Board members and the director of the Virginia Association of School Boards.

The school system's previous superintendent, Scott Baker, was fired without cause during a closed session at a Jan. 10 School Board meeting.

Taylor will begin his appointment



Twigg



Balow

as superintendent Nov. 1. With an annual base salary of \$245,000, he will be the second-highest-paid school division leader in the greater Fredericksburg region. While Taylor has served in administrative government roles, he has no prior education leadership experience.

The board's 4-3 decision to hire Taylor, who served as Spotsylvania County administrator from 2015-19 before taking the same position in Greene County, has caused contention on the School Board and

among residents. Over the past several months, parents have expressed concerns over the selection process, Taylor's lack of experience in education and his personal ties to the school board chairman.

Critics of Taylor's selection also have pointed to controversial social media posts made to a profile appearing to belong to Taylor. Members of the Virginia Board of Education referred to these posts, which one member described as racially and socially insensitive, when discussing whether Taylor would be granted a superintendent's license.

The board ultimately voted 6-2 in favor of licensure, though several who voted to grant Taylor the

license agreed that the posts, if legitimate, would have disqualified him from a leadership position if they had been doing the hiring.

Taylor suggested during an interview with ABC7 last month that the social media posts were the result of his profile being hacked.

Last week, two county residents, Jeffrey Glazer and Christina Ramos, filed a petition in Spotsylvania Circuit Court requesting "a temporary and permanent injunction against the hiring of Mark Taylor." The petitioners are requesting a judicial review of the School Board's decision.

Schools

From A1

Emails obtained by The Free Lance-Star from the state Department of Education through requests under the Freedom of Information Act show a senior adviser to Balow and Elizabeth Schultz, assistant superintendent of public instruction, were early points of contact for School Board members. That adviser, Jon Russell, is now the Spotsylvania school division's manager of executive communications.

Atif Qarni, former Virginia Secretary of Education, said it is "rare for [the] State Board of Education or VDOE to get involved" in the hiring of a local superintendent.

"The involvement usually happens when a school division has had a history of failing to meet State Standards of Accreditation, and VDOE gets involved to work out a memorandum of understanding with the local division to intervene in specific matters," Qarni wrote in an email to The Free Lance-Star. "This could possibly include selection of a superintendent; however, this usually would be written out in the MOU and agreed upon by both sides."

School Board member Lisa Phelps emailed Schultz on Jan. 24, soon after Schultz was appointed to her position at the VDOE by Gov. Glenn Youngkin, requesting a meeting.

Phelps contacted Schultz again May 4, informing her that the School Board would request an extension to the 120-day time frame that Virginia Code provides for a school board to fill a superintendent vacancy. Phelps also referred to an upcoming conference that both would attend.

Schultz replied to Phelps the same day, thanking her for the "opportunity to touch base on Spotsylvania County Superintendent search" and saying, "It will be a pleasure to meet you at the Education Summit."

She also forwarded Phelps's email to Balow, Russell, and Balow's Chief of Staff Dicky Shanor.

Later in May, VDOE Chief Policy Analyst Rebecca Askew passed along to Russell a request from Twigg for a meeting with Balow, to discuss "hiring, ratios and standards of learning," according to her email, which she copied to Twigg at his personal AOL email address. Twigg later followed up on that request for a meeting in another email to Russell.

Russell scheduled the meeting with Balow via Zoom on May 31.

School Board member Dawn Shelley, who served as board chair prior to Twigg, said she never requested a meeting with the state superintendent during her term as chair.

"I would not think it appropriate. There are over



FILE, PETER CIHELKA, THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Attendees take their seats ahead of a Spotsylvania School Board meeting in September.

130 school boards in Virginia. I wouldn't think the State Superintendent would have time for that," Shelley wrote in an email to The Free Lance-Star.

Two other former Spotsylvania School Board chairs, Baron Braswell and Erin Grampp, also said they never requested meetings with the state superintendent and could not think of a reason why they would.

In April, the School Board hired GR Recruiting to conduct the search for a new division superintendent.

On May 16, the School Board held a special meeting with consultant Sandi Gero to finalize the requirements and profile for the new superintendent. At that meeting, board members argued against requiring that the successful candidate have experience in public education.

Gero told the board she didn't expect to receive any applications from non-educators.

On May 20, School Board attorney Brad King sent Twigg an email citing section 8VAC20-390-10 of Virginia Administrative Code, which states the requirements for being placed on the state's list of eligible superintendent candidates.

According to the code, one of the qualifications applicants must meet to be placed on the list is, "at least five years of satisfactory and full-time experience in administration or supervision, or both, in public schools"

"Here is the state regulation we just discussed," King wrote to Twigg. "As you see, this confirms what the state STATUTE says: that the superintendents must come from the list of eligible candidates maintained by the State Board of Education. The qualifications and routes for getting on that list are included in this regulation."

King later resigned from his position as the board's attorney.

On June 7, Twigg forwarded King's email with the citation from 8VAC20-390-10 to Russell, along with a different section of the Administrative Code.

According to that section, 8VAC20-23-630, individuals may be candidates for a superintendent's license if they have a master's degree or equivalent, a minimum of three years of successful experience in a senior leadership position and a recommendation from "a Virginia school board interested in employing the individual."

Twigg asked Russell in the June 7 email for "any help to write a summary or that tweaks [sic] state requirements."

In a document attached to the June 7 email, either Twigg or Russell annotated the quoted code section with the following: "A Virginia School Board can choose a Superintendent who is an experienced leader from outside the world of public education. The School Board's right to choose an outsider as their Superintendent is found in Option IV in the regulation relating to the licensure of a Superintendent. Mr. Russell notes that the recommendation called for ... would be in the form of a letter signed by the local School Board Chairman. That's all there is to it."

GR Recruiting accepted applications for the superintendent position through mid-June, and the School Board held two rounds of interviews of the top candidates at the end of June and in early July.

The School Board held a special meeting to discuss the final two candidates for superintendent July 8, but held no public vote to recommend either one.

The next morning, Twigg sent Russell an email with a "confidential" letter attached recommending Taylor for the position.

On July 10, a Sunday, Russell forwarded the email and attached letter to Balow, writing, "Jillian if you have a chance please review this attachment. I will try to reach you tonight."

Russell sent Twigg's letter to the VDOE's director of licensure, Maggie Clemmons, on July 11, and asked her to add Taylor to the list of candidates for licensure by the Board of Education.

On July 26, Russell for-

warded an email chain between Taylor and Clemmons to Shanor.

"Chief of Staff Shanor, please meet Spotsy School Board Chairman Twigg & Mark Taylor," Russell wrote. "I have been working hard to get Mark through the end-zone to be approved as superintendent by the Board of Education at their next meeting."

On Aug. 4, Twigg wrote to Shanor, thanking him for "your letter earlier this week that validates Mark Taylor has completed his requirements" and for sharing the news that "your team walked down the hall and put [Taylor's] name in the stack of several superintendents that will [via package] be approved at the school board's August meeting on the 17th..."

Twigg asked Shanor to tell him if he should expect anything to delay the Board of Education's approval of Taylor's licensure.

"As you know, we are anxious to get started with our new superintendent, and we want no setbacks," he wrote.

Shanor replied that "it should be a consent agenda item so no concerns."

The Board of Education did pull Taylor's name from the list of candidates for licensure Aug. 17 after it became evident that the Spotsylvania School Board had not voted in public to recommend him.

Board of Education members at the Sept. 15 meeting said they were satisfied that this "procedural error" had been remedied and approved Taylor's licensure by a 6-2 vote.

Hiring a superintendent is one of the duties assigned to local school boards by Virginia Code, said Gina Patterson, executive director of the Virginia School Board Association, which has facilitated superintendent searches for many school divisions.

Patterson said the state Department of Education typically has little involvement in the process beyond granting licensure.

Adele Uphaus: 540/735-1973
auphaus@freelancestar.com
@flsadele

Search is on for new Spotsy school leader

BOARD FINALIZES
CANDIDATE PROFILE
FOR SUPERINTENDENT

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The Spotsylvania County School Board is seeking a new division leader who understands finance and is a “trusted educational leader,” but is not required to have a background in instruction or in the pub-

lic school system.

The board approved a candidate profile for the next division superintendent at a special meeting Monday. The profile is included in the job posting, which is open for applications through June 17.

School Board members Dawn Shelley and Nicole Cole attempted Monday to make it a requirement that

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candidates have a background in public school instruction, but fellow board members did not support making this a requirement.

“I think we shouldn’t insist on educational background,” Chair Kirk Twigg said.

Twigg asked that the candidate profile include “business acumen.”

Sandi Gero, a consultant with GR Recruiting, the firm hired by the board to conduct the superintendent search, said the board could ask candidates about their business experience during the interview process.

“We want to focus now on pulling some of the research-based characteristics,” Gero said, referring to community input gathered over the past two weeks through an online survey and five town halls.

Twigg said he doesn’t want to wait until the interview process to find out whether candidate has business experience.

“My reason for producing that point now is because you don’t want to bring a total educator to the floor and then have him pop out a couple of business points or project management points,” he said. “Let them know that this school district will be looking for some sort of business background as part of an acceptance criteria. Something so that we’re not just getting a pure educator.”

At Gero’s suggestion, the board agreed by consensus to add the phrase “someone who understands finance” to the

candidate profile.

In Virginia, individuals can be licensed as public school division superintendents if they have either a doctorate degree in education and five years of experience in teaching and administration; a master’s degree in education and extensive experience in administration and instruction; a valid out-of-state division superintendent license; or a master’s degree and “three years of successful, full-time experience in a senior leadership position, such as chief executive officer or senior military officer,” according to state code.

According to the approved candidate profile, the board is also looking for candidates who demonstrate “a student-first philosophy” and responsibility for their actions, are comfortable making difficult decisions, are effective communicators who can create strong school-community relations, are transparent and are trusted leaders who value ethics and lead by example.

The results of the online survey, which had about 1,700 unique responses, showed that the community’s top three preferred leadership qualities are effective communication and relationship-building; ability to build trust through ethics and integrity; and “leading by example through honest practices.”

A majority of the board members also rated effective communication and trust-building as the most valued leadership traits.

Board members included confidence in making difficult decisions and use of “evidence-based interventions to obtain equi-

table access to learning for ALL students” in their top valued traits.

The survey showed that although 77 percent of respondents said their interactions with the school division have been positive, 73 percent also said they would not recommend the division to family members or friends.

Gero said this amounts to a “marketing problem,” while Cole suggested that it is “an indication that the things that are good about the district don’t outweigh the negative things.”

According to the board’s timeline, Gero will present the top candidates to the board in a closed session and the board will finalize interview questions June 28.

The board will conduct the first round of interviews virtually June 29 and the second round July 7.

The successful candidate could be announced as early as July 7.

Also at Monday’s meeting, Twigg said that the Virginia Education Summit conference attended by board members April Gillespie and Lisa Phelps earlier this month—which was paid for using school division funds—was “a conference with the Virginia Department of Education.”

Elizabeth Shultz, assistant state superintendent of public instruction, was one of the guest speakers, but the conference was not sponsored by the VDOE. It was sponsored by the Middle Resolution Policy Network, a registered political action committee.

Adele Uphaus-Conner:
540/735-1973
auphaus@freelancestar.com
@fsladele

Spotsy still looking for new schools leader

SUPERINTENDENT SEARCH CONTINUES; BOARD GETS UPDATE ON JOB VACANCIES

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The search continues for a new superintendent of Spotsylvania County schools, School Board Chair Kirk Twigg said during Monday's School Board meeting.

Twigg officially introduced new interim superintendent Kelly Guempel to the public early in the meeting. Guempel has been principal of Spotsylvania High School for four years and was appointed interim superintendent June 21.

"[Guempel] has accepted the role of interim superintendent indefinitely, while our search continues," Twigg said Monday.

According to the timeline approved in May, the board had anticipated naming a new permanent division leader as early

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as July 7.

The board held a special meeting in closed session on Friday to “discuss the two finalists for the superintendent position,” according to the agenda, but came out of the 90-minute closed session having made no decision.

“Deliberations are continuing,” Twigg announced Friday. “We did not make an official determination/election regarding the superintendent, but we the School Board are continuing deliberations and a decision remains forthcoming. We made some important progress and it won’t be long.”

At Monday’s meeting, the board heard an update on the number of vacant positions the human resources office is trying to fill in the month before the school year begins.

Human Resources Director Amy Williams said there are 285 vacancies in the division—151 open licensed teacher positions; 100 other classified positions such as paraprofessionals, school nurses and bookkeepers; and 34 openings in the transportation department.

Williams said the areas of greatest need are K–5 classroom teachers, with 58 still needed to fill all vacancies; special education at all levels; and science, math and English secondary teachers.

There is also a recruit-

ment effort for substitute teachers, Williams said.

The division has filled 265 licensed positions so far this year.

In his comments, Guempel acknowledged that “we have a lot of positions to fill,” but said staff are “giving everything they have trying to fill these positions.”

Twigg said during his board member comments that the number of open teaching positions—151—is “a good number” and that the division has “embarked on what I tell myself is a new beginning.”

“We’re getting the backbone restructured in this county,” he said. “People are creeping in wanting to work here.”

He continued to say that, “a new superintendent is just around the corner, and then you will see leadership beyond measure.”

Board members April Gillespie and Rabih Abuismail in their comments also asked the community to focus on the upcoming school year, rather than the tensions that have plagued the board since January.

Those tensions surfaced again during public comments, when Twigg paused the proceedings to ask how many of the speakers who had not yet addressed the board planned to talk about the board’s behavior.

After several people raised their hands, Twigg said he would allow them to speak but “you will not talk about the behavior of

the board.”

He then attempted to call for a recess to consult the board’s attorney before permitting the last two speakers who had signed up to address the board.

As some in the audience grew angry, Gillespie cited School Board policy BDDE, which governs public participation at meetings and states, “When there is a topic of great public interest and a large group of citizens desiring to speak on the same topic, the Board Chair may exercise discretion to allow no more than five speakers address the Board on that topic.”

Board members Nicole Cole, Dawn Shelley and Lorita Daniels said the chairman should state before public comments begin that he or she plans to limit the number of speakers on one topic, rather than cutting comments short when speakers have already been acknowledged.

“While that has always been in the policy, it was never used because this board, at least in the past, wanted to allow everyone to have their opportunity to speak,” Shelley said. “I would say at the last [regular] meeting, five or more people spoke about Mrs. Cole, but you didn’t cut it off then. So why now? Mr. Twigg, I’m just going to say it doesn’t look good.”

In the end, Twigg allowed public comments to continue unrestricted.

Adele Uphaus-Conner:
540/735-1973
auphaus@freelancestar.com
@fksadele



State board defers decision on superintendent license for Mark Taylor

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The Virginia Board of Education on Wednesday deferred a decision on whether to grant a superintendent's

license to Mark Taylor, a former Spotsylvania County administrator who the county School Board is considering to lead the school division.

Taylor's name was on a list of "qualified persons for the Office of Division Superintendent of Schools" for the Board of Education to certify at its meeting Wednesday,

but after discussing the matter with an attorney in closed session, the board voted unanimously to remove his name from the list.

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Taylor

SPOTSY

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Board of Education President Daniel Gecker said the board would revisit the question of whether to grant Taylor a superintendent's license at the September meeting, after gathering more information from the school division.

Taylor was Spotsylvania County administrator from 2015 to 2019, when he was hired by Greene County as its chief executive. He served as Spotsylvania's county attorney from 2000 to 2006.

Taylor was on the board of School Board Chairman Kirk Twigg's nonprofit business, Emerging Stars, according to the Virginia State Corporation Commission, and Taylor's wife, Francesca, wrote letters to the editor in support of Twigg's campaigns for School Board in 2015 and 2019.

Taylor does not have a background in education and his own children were homeschooled, according to a 2015 Free Lance-Star article, but he could qualify for a superintendent's license under Option IV of the Virginia Code's licensure regulations for school personnel.

Under this option, individuals may be considered eligible for a superintendent's license if they have a master's degree or equivalent, three years in a senior leadership position and a recommendation from a "Virginia school board interested in em-

ploying the individual as superintendent."

The Spotsylvania School Board has not taken any public votes to recommend anyone for the office of superintendent. The board last discussed the issue July 8, when it held a special meeting "to discuss the two finalists for the superintendent position." No vote was taken at that meeting and the superintendent search has not been on the agenda of any of the five meetings the School Board has held since then.

Virginia Code 2.2-3710 prohibits the transaction of public business unless a vote has taken place at a public meeting.

"No public body shall vote by secret," Virginia Code states.

Members of the Spotsylvania community cited this as a concern while addressing the Board of Education during public comments Wednesday.

"There was ample time to hold a vote [on recommending Taylor] without identifying the confidentiality of the candidate," said community member Faith Jarvis. "When I saw his name on the list, I was concerned because ... the process for his recommendation violates the law."

School Board member Dawn Shelley, who said she was speaking on her own behalf, cited Virginia

Code 22.1-71, which states that "School Board members appointed or elected by district or otherwise shall have no organization or duties except such as may be assigned to them by the school board as a whole."

"The School Board as a whole did not vote or authorize the chairman to send a recommendation for superintendent licensure for anyone to the VDOE," Shelley said. "The chair did not have the authority to send a letter from the board. Therefore, the candidate's application must be considered incomplete."

Twigg also addressed the Board of Education on Wednesday and described those who spoke before him as "five of the 12 naysayers who come to our meetings and talk like that."

"You have a letter that has the word 'confidential,'" he told the board. "We are still in private session because our attorney advised us that we can't vote in public on anything until an individual is on the list."

Twigg said there was "a choice made in private session" by "majority thumbs-up vote to support a candidate."

Taylor's name was not on the agenda for the Board of Education's meeting when it was first released

on Aug. 11, but it was added Aug. 12 to "correct an oversight," Department of Education spokesman Charles Pyle said.

The Board of Education in June approved another candidate for superintendent licensure under Option IV.

During discussion, board members familiar with the candidate said he had been recommended by the Fairfax City School Board and would be overseeing only the operational aspect of the small school division.

Fairfax County Public Schools handles curriculum and student support services for the Fairfax City schools through a joint agreement that has been in place for many years.

The Fairfax City School Board approved the employment contract for the superintendent candidate at a May 16 meeting, according to the agenda, and the Board of Education approved the candidate's licensure in June.

The Board of Education next meets Sept. 15. The Spotsylvania School Board has a special meeting on Friday, but as of Wednesday afternoon, the superintendent search was not on the agenda.

Adele Uphaus-Conner:
540/735-1973
auphaus@freelancestar.com
@fadsadele



Board backs Taylor as Spotsylvania school leader

SCHOOL BOARD VOTES TO RECOMMEND EX-COUNTY OFFICIAL AS SUPERINTENDENT

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The Spotsylvania County School Board on Thursday evening voted to send a letter to the Virginia Board of Education indicating that it intends to hire Mark Taylor to the position of division superintendent, and asking that his name be added to a list of candidates eligible for a superintendent license.



Taylor

The motion to recommend Taylor was approved by a 4-3 vote, with board members Dawn Shelley, Nicole Cole and Lorita Daniels voting against it.

The board held a special meeting Thursday for “consideration of a matter regarding the licensure of the division superintendent,” according to the agenda.

Taylor was formerly employed by

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Spotsylvania as county attorney and county administrator. In 2019, he was hired by Greene County as county administrator at a salary of \$135,000, according to the Charlottesville Daily Progress.

The School Board earlier this year agreed to list a base salary of \$245,000 per year in the job description for division superintendent.

Taylor has a law degree but no experience in the public education field. According to a 2015 Free Lance—Star article, his children were homeschooled.

According to the Virginia State Corporation Commission, Taylor and his wife, Francesca, are directors of School Board Chair Kirk Twigg's non-profit corporation Emerging Stars.

Francesca Taylor wrote letters to the editor in support of Twigg's campaigns for School Board in 2015 and 2019.

Taylor's name was on a list of candidates for the Board of Education to certify at its meeting earlier this month, but the board voted unanimously to approve the list without his name on it in order to gather more information about how his name was placed on the list.

Until Thursday night, the Spotsylvania School Board had not voted in public to forward Taylor's name to the Board of Education with the indication that it planned to hire him, which is one of the requirements for receiving a license under Option IV of Virginia Code's licensure regulations.

Option IV lays out the requirements for obtaining a superintendent's license without a background in education. Candidates must have a master's degree or equivalent and three years of successful senior leadership experience.

Twigg told the Board of Education at its meeting

earlier this month that it had received a "confidential" letter about Taylor.

At Thursday's meeting, Shelley told Twigg that "by bringing this to a motion tonight, you are admitting that you wrote a fraudulent letter last month."

"Therefore, you have caused the candidate to submit a fraudulent application," she said. "That's not on him, that's on you."

Cole and Daniels asked Twigg if he planned to recuse himself from the vote to recommend Taylor in consideration of their personal relationship.

"In my opinion, my personal opinion, if there is a conflict of interest, for us

to be a board that is transparent, I do believe you must excuse yourself from this vote," Daniels said.

The School Board earlier this year signed a contract agreeing to pay search firm GR Recruiting \$25,000 to conduct a nationwide search for a new division superintendent.

In a closed session at a special meeting in July, the board discussed two finalists for the superintendent position. It is not clear if Taylor was one of the two candidates.

The next state Board of Education meeting is Sept. 15.

Adele Uphaus-Conner:
540/735-1973
auphaus@freelancestar.com
@flsadele

Board received 21 applications for school leader job

SPOTSY SCHOOL BOARD
INTERVIEWED 5 CANDIDATES
FOR SUPERINTENDENT POST

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The Spotsylvania County School Board received 21 applications for the position of superintendent and interviewed five candidates, the division's new manager of executive communications, Jon Russell, said Wednesday.

The School Board on Aug. 25 approved by a slim margin a motion to recommend attorney and former Spotsylvania County Administrator Mark Taylor for the position.

Taylor must first be licensed as a superintendent by the Virginia Board of Education.

Taylor has no background or experience in public education, but according to School Board members who approved his recommendation, he qualifies to receive a superintendent license under Option IV of Virginia Code's licensure regulations, since he has the equivalent of a master's degree and three years of successful senior leadership experience.

Taylor left Spotsylvania in

2019 and was hired by the Greene County Board of Supervisors as county administrator.

He and his wife sit on the board of Spotsylvania School Board Chair Kirk Twigg's non-profit, Emerging Stars, and his wife wrote letters to the editor in support of Twigg's campaigns for School Board in 2015 and 2019.

The School Board in May signed a \$25,000 contract with GR Recruiting to conduct a national search for a new superintendent.

According to the job posting on GR Recruiting's website, which was agreed upon in May by the School Board, the successful candidate was to be "a trusted public education leader who values ethics and integrity by practicing moral authority and leads by example through honest practices."

Other requested qualifications included someone who understands finance, "someone who promotes a 'student-first' philosophy" and someone who "provides sustained, systemic, and evidence-based interventions to obtain equitable access to learning for ALL students."

Russell said School Board

members were given a number matrix to score the five candidates who were interviewed.

Applications for the position were due June 17, according to the job posting on GR Recruiting's website. Completed applications were to include a letter of interest, the online application form, a résumé or curriculum vitae and three letters of reference.

Marie Durrer, chair of the Greene County Board of Supervisors, said on Tuesday that, to her knowledge, that board has not been contacted regarding references for Taylor.

Greene County's deputy county administrator, Tracy Morris, responded to an emailed question about whether county staff had been contacted regarding references for Taylor by stating, "The information requested below is regarding a personnel matter and is not subject to FOIA."

Last week, Spotsylvania School Board member Dawn Shelley requested that GR Recruiting president Gary Ray provide her with the timestamp indicating when Taylor's application was received.

Shelley said Wednesday that

The School Board on Aug. 25 approved by a slim margin a motion to recommend attorney and former Spotsylvania County Administrator Mark Taylor for the superintendent position.

she made the request because, "I was told that he was a late submission requested to be added to the package of top candidates for the board by Mr. Twigg."

Ray told Shelley in a Sept. 1 email that he "cannot act on something that was discussed and covered in a closed meeting or at an individual Board member's request" and said he would forward her request to Twigg.

Shelley on Sept. 3 requested the same information in an email to Twigg, which as of Thursday had not been answered.

Taylor's name and the fact that the School Board was considering him for the position of superintendent has been public knowledge since the Aug. 17 Virginia Board of Education meeting, at which his name was

included on a list of qualified candidates seeking licensure, even though the School Board had not yet taken a vote in public to recommend him.

At that meeting, the Board of Education pulled Taylor's name from the list of candidates for licensure to gather more information from the school division.

Twigg spoke during public comments at the Aug. 17 meeting and informed the Board of Education that it had received a "confidential" letter regarding Taylor.

Taylor's name is expected to be included in the list of candidates seeking licensure for the Board of Education's approval at its Sept. 15 meeting.

As of Thursday, Taylor had not responded to questions from The Free Lance-Star about his goals for the school division, should he get the job of superintendent.

A group of community members are planning a rally to express concerns about Taylor's suitability to be superintendent during the School Board's next regular meeting on Monday.

Adele Uphaus-Conner: 540/735-1973
auphaus@freelancestar.com
@flsadele

July 9 letter cites 'final candidate' for superintendent

VA. BOARD TO TAKE UP FORMER SPOTSY ADMINISTRATOR'S LICENSURE THIS WEEK

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Spotsylvania School Board Chair Kirk Twigg on July 9 sent a letter to Jon Russell, then a spe-



Taylor
the superintendent position."

The letter, which The

cial council at the Virginia Department of Education, informing him that Mark Taylor was "the final candidate for

Free Lance—Star obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request, is dated the day after the School Board met in a closed session to discuss "the two finalists for the superintendent position."

The board took no public vote at that meeting to recommend Taylor, who formerly was the Spotsyl-

vania County administrator and is a longtime friend of Twigg, for the position.

In the July 9 letter, Twigg wrote, "The Spotsylvania School Board and Mr. Mark Taylor are all in agreement that he is the final candidate for the superintendent position.

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SUPERINTENDENT

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We were assured by [Russell's] office, GR Recruiting, and Mr. Taylor that all requirements have been met for Mr. Taylor to be placed on the Virginia state approved superintendent's list."

Twigg sent the letter to Russell, who was hired by the School Board in August for the newly created position of manager of executive communications, as an email attachment.

The email—dated July 9 at 11:09 a.m. and sent from Twigg's personal email address—was titled "Confidential: Superintendent Letter Needed" and reads, "Per our discussion... please see attached."

Russell sent the letter on to Maggie Clemmons, VDOE's director of licensure and school leadership, on Monday, July 11.

"Attached is a formal letter from Spotsylvania school district requesting their newly-selected superintendent be added to the BOE list for approval.

I have copied Chairman Twigg on this email so you can correspond with him on any additional documentation you will need.

Chairman Twigg, Maggie Clemmons can get you going in the right direction on this process," Russell wrote in an email.

Clemmons responded, saying that her office would need to have "a completed application on file to ensure the candidate meets all the conditions and requirements for licensure."

Clemmons asked Twigg to share whether an application packet had been submitted "on the candidate's behalf."

Twigg responded by saying that Taylor had not submitted an application and asking Clemmons to send one to him and to Taylor.

Taylor's name was not included in the list of candidates to be granted licensure by the Board of Education at its Aug. 17 when the board's agenda was first published, but it was added a few days later

to correct "an oversight," VDOE spokesman Charles Pyle said.

The Board of Education on Aug. 17 pulled Taylor's name from the list in order to gather more information from the school division about his application.

The School Board on Aug. 25 held its first public vote on whether to recommend Taylor as superintendent, approving his appointment in a 4-3 vote.

Taylor has no background in public education or educational leadership. He told The Free Lance-Star in 2015 that his children were homeschooled.

In 2019, he left his position with Spotsylvania County to become administrator of Greene County, a smaller locality west of Orange.

Taylor's name is included in the list of candidates to be granted licensure by the Board of Education at its Sept. 15 meeting.

Adele Uphaus-Conner:
540/735-1973
auphaus@freelancestar.com
@flsadele

State board OKs superintendent license for Taylor

APPROVAL CLEARS WAY FOR SPOTSY SCHOOLS TO HIRE EX-COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The Virginia Board of Education on Thursday approved granting a superintendent's license to former Spotsylvania County Administrator Mark

Taylor, thereby clearing the way for the School Board to officially give him the job of division superintendent and work out a contract.

Board of Education members mainly cited their belief in the role of locally elected school boards to make the best decisions for their local school systems.

"We are not confirming any-



Taylor

this list (of candidates eligible to obtain a superintendent's license)?"

body," said BOE member Andy Rotherham, an appointee of Gov. Glenn Youngkin. "We're saying, do they meet a baseline standard under the law to be on

The board determined that Taylor qualifies for a superintendent's license based on Option IV of the Virginia Code's licensure regulations, which lays out the requirements for obtaining a superintendent's license without a background in education.

Candidates must have a master's degree or equivalent, three years of successful senior lead-

ership experience and a recommendation from a Virginia School Board interested in hiring them.

Two BOE members, Anne Holton and Tammy Mann—who were appointed by former Gov. Ralph Northam—voted against granting Taylor a license.

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Virginia Administrative Code section 8VAC20-23-750 cites a number of reasons for denying a license, ending with “Other good and just cause in the best interest of the public schools of the Commonwealth of Virginia.”

Holton cited this reason as supporting her belief that the Board of Education could vote against granting Taylor a license. She referred to posts that appear to have been made to Taylor’s personal Facebook page, and described them as racially and socially insensitive.

“It does not reflect well on the public schools of Virginia—it does not serve the school children of Virginia—to have somebody who posts not one, not two, but numerous racially bigoted and offensive memes,” Holton said. “Among other things, if these posts are accurate and true, they

just reflect a significant lack of judgement about communications and what a public official’s role in the world would be.”

Several of the board members who voted to grant Taylor the license agreed that the posts would have disqualified him from a leadership decision if they had been doing the hiring.

“On a local board, I would consider these a disqualification,” said member Alan Siebert, a Youngkin appointee.

Rotherham said that, “assuming that those posts are legitimate, if I were on a local board, I would not vote to hire, either.

“But that’s not our role,” he continued. “We’re not on a local board. That’s for the people of Spotsylvania, speaking through a local school board. They have to make these decisions. That’s fundamentally the civics lesson of this entire episode.”

Taylor suggested during an interview Wednesday

with ABC-7 that the social media posts were the result of his profile being hacked. Those posts were discussed by many of the two dozen Spotsylvania parents and teachers—including School Board members Nicole Cole and Lorita Daniels, speaking as parents of schoolchildren—who addressed the BOE during public comments, asking them not to grant the license.

They asked board members to consider Taylor’s lack of public school teaching or administration experience, his personal friendship with School Board Chair Kirk Twigg and the fact that his application for licensure last month was sent to the Virginia Department of Education without the School Board having held a public vote to recommend him.

Parent Rich Lieberman argued that Taylor does not meet the qualifications for school division superintendents as enumerated in Virginia Ad-

ministrative Code section 8VAC20-390-10, which states, “The applicant shall have had at least five years of satisfactory and full-time experience in administration or supervision, or both, in public schools.”

About a dozen community members—including School Board members April Gillespie, Lisa Phelps and Rabih Abuismail—attended the meeting to speak in support of Taylor.

They described those who spoke against him as being part of an activist group with ties to a teachers’ union, described Taylor as an ethical leader with extensive experience managing budgets, and asked the BOE to respect the local board’s decision to go with an “out-of-the-box” candidate for superintendent.

“Let Spotsylvania County move on to take care of Spotsylvania County,” Phelps said.

Adele Uphaus-Conner:
540/735-1973
auphaus@freelancestar.com
@filsadele

Taylor signs on as superintendent

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Mark Taylor signed a contract with the Spotsylvania County School Board to serve as the new division superintendent beginning Nov. 1.

The board on Friday approved by a vote of 4-3 a motion by Rabih Abuismail to



Taylor

“submit the contract and negotiations forward as discussed in closed session.”

The contract, as described on Friday, guarantees Taylor more than three years of full pay if he is fired without cause.

Taylor will also receive the full advertised base salary of \$245,000 per year—\$30,000 more per year than previous superintendent Scott Baker was making.

Baker was hired in 2011. In 2018, the board increased his base salary from \$195,000 to \$205,000 per year. According to his most recent contract, effective July 2020, his annual salary was \$215,000 when he was fired without cause in January.

Taylor has no experience in the field of public education and is employed as administrator for Greene County. According

to an article in the Charlottesville Daily Progress, he was hired to that position in 2019 at a salary of \$135,000 per year.

The board discussed the contract in a closed session Friday with Whit Robinson, an attorney based in Warrenton with a specialty in “land use cases, criminal matters, construction law, federal and state election law and government contracts,” according to his website.

Twigg said Friday that Robinson was hired on Sept. 15 through the school division’s procurement process for a short time period, not to exceed one month, to “help us with needs that are imminent.”

The board’s previous attorney, Brad King of the Richmond firm Sands Anderson, ended his representation Sept. 12.

Board members Nicole Cole and Dawn Shelley said they had concerns about employing an attorney without a specialty in education law to represent the board during its negotiations with Taylor.

“Education law needs to be known to understand how a contract for a superintendent for a school division should be properly written,” Cole said. “This is not a general contract. There are specific contract provisions that we need to know that

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we can be counseled on for our protection as a board, since the superintendent is someone that we hire.”

Board member Lorita Daniels attempted to appeal Twigg’s decision to hire Robinson without a full vote from the board, but her appeal was overturned by a 4-3 vote.

Robinson told the board prior to going into closed session that the contract with Taylor was “primarily based on the previous one.”

“We are not reinventing the wheel,” he said.

But after the closed session, Cole and Daniels described some of the provisions as being “out of the norm.”

Cole described a provision stating that Taylor will receive three years and eight months of full pay if he is fired without cause as “a real egregious overreach.”

“In our standard contract, historically, if the superintendent is terminated without cause, he gets paid through one year,” she said. “For this contract, they want to make sure this individual gets paid through the end of three years and eight months, regardless of how long he works.”

Baker’s contract from

July 2020 states that he will receive all compensation, salary and benefits for one year from the effective date of his termination without cause, or until June 30, 2024, whichever time period is shorter.

Shelley said the contract with Taylor also waives School Board policy that states that employees must work for a minimum of 15 years before retirement to receive health insurance retiree benefits.

“No matter how long he works, he will receive health insurance, which could cost the division hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of dollars,” she said.

The contract also provides Taylor with an amount to cover moving expenses, though not the full \$10,000 originally requested, Daniels said Friday.

According to Spotsylvania County’s real estate database, Taylor and his wife, Francesca—under their company The Spotsy Spot—own a house in the Spotsylvania Courthouse area.

They also own a house in Standardsville, about 60 miles away, according to Greene County data.

Shelley also cited concern with a provision in the contract that states the board cannot discuss

Taylor or his performance without him being present.

“We are not allowed to talk about him unless he’s in the room,” she said.

Daniels commented that the contract is written “as if the person accepting this contract is our boss.”

“I think it’s important that when we hire someone, we set the tone and parameters,” she said. “I understand there are negotiations, but we also need to be clear that we are the boss.”

None of the other board members commented on the contract Friday.

“I don’t feel comfortable speaking about something that is not finalized,” Vice Chair April Gillespie said. “We are still in negotiations.”

Cole said Monday afternoon that she is disputing whether the contract can legally go into effect, since Friday’s vote was to move negotiations forward, not to authorize the chair to accept or sign a contract.

“This is all under further deliberation,” Twigg said Friday.

Cole said at Friday’s meeting that she is filing a lawsuit in circuit court to appeal the Virginia Board of Education’s decision to license Taylor.

Adele Uphaus-Conner:
540/735-1973
auphaus@freelancestar.com
@filsadele@filsadele

New Spotsy school chief agrees to contract

AT \$245,000, MARK TAYLOR BECOMES ONE OF REGION'S HIGHEST-PAID OFFICIALS

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Spotsylvania County School Board Chair Kirk Twigg signed a contract with prospective superintendent Mark Taylor on Sept. 16, the same day that Twigg and other board members told the public that contract negotiations with Taylor were continuing.



M. Taylor

The School Board held a special meeting Sept. 16 and approved a motion to “submit the contract and negotiations forward as discussed in closed session.”

“This is all under further deliberation,” Twigg told the public as the special meeting adjourned.

When Taylor begins his appointment as superintendent Nov. 1, he will be the second-

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highest-paid school division leader in the region.

Although Taylor has no background in public education, he qualifies for a superintendent's license based on Option IV of the Virginia Code's licensure regulations, which lays out the requirements for obtaining a superintendent's license without a background in education.

Candidates must have a master's degree or equivalent, three years of successful senior leadership experience and a recommendation from a Virginia School Board interested in hiring them.

Taylor will receive an annual base salary of \$245,000, which is \$5,000 less than Stafford County Superintendent Thomas Taylor, who has a doctorate in education and a master's degree in business administration and worked as a teacher, principal, chief academic officer, chief operating officer and deputy superintendent in several Virginia school divisions prior to becoming superintendent in Stafford.

Spotsylvania Public Schools has about 24,000 enrolled students, as compared to Stafford's more than 30,000, and about 1,200 fewer employees than Stafford.

Taylor will make more than King George County schools Superintendent Robert Benson, who retired in June after 10 years as division leader; and more than Caroline Superintendent Sarah Calveric and Fredericksburg Superintendent Marci Catlett, who both have decades of teaching and ad-

ministrative experience.

Benson's salary, according to his most recent contract, effective July 1, 2020, was \$195,722. Calveric's is \$186,963, as of Aug. 17 and Catlett's is \$199,500 as of July 1, 2021.

Taylor will make \$30,000 more per year than his predecessor, Scott Baker, who was making \$215,000 when he was fired without cause in January.

Baker's contract was renewed most recently in June 2020. Twigg and board member Rabih Abuismail voted against renewing the contract, which increased Baker's pay from \$205,000 to \$215,000 annually.

Taylor will also make more than Spotsylvania County Administrator Ed Petrovitch, who makes \$210,000 annually, according to his most recent contract.

Taylor's contract is the only one of all regional superintendent's contracts that guarantees him full salary and benefits for more than 12 months if he is fired without cause.

He will receive "an amount equal to all salary, compensation and benefits" through June 2026, according to the contract.

All other area superintendents—those employed by the school boards in Fredericksburg, Stafford, Caroline County and King George County—would receive pay for 12 months or until the expiration of their four-year contracts, whichever time period is shorter, if they are terminated without cause.

Baker's contract specified that he will receive salary, compensation and benefits for one year after

his termination in January.

Taylor's contract also differs from other local superintendent contracts in that the amount of deferred compensation he is to receive is not specified.

"The Board will make an annual contribution to a deferred compensation plan on behalf of the Superintendent, if any, designated from time to time by the Superintendent," the contract states.

Deferred compensation is an arrangement in which a portion of an employee's income is paid out at a later date, after the income was earned. Taxes on the income are also deferred until the employee receives the income.

The contracts for the other four superintendents either specify an annual dollar amount or percentage of base salary—between \$20,000 and \$25,000 or 9.5% to 10%, in the case of local contracts—to go toward the superintendent's deferred compensation plan.

Taylor's contract also notes that "The Superintendent shall be entitled to hear and respond to any Board discussion of matters pertaining to the Superintendent personally."

No other local superintendent's contract contains that language.

Taylor will be paid up to \$5,000 to cover moving expenses from Greene County to Spotsylvania County, some 60 miles away.

School Board members were informed Monday that Taylor's contract had been signed and executed.

Adele Uphaus-Conner:
540/735-1973
auphaus@freelancestar.com
@filsadele