

Teachers Critical of Penasco Super. Fired or Demoted

By Ari Levin
SUN Staff Writer

Teachers and staff have filed multiple complaints against Peñasco Superintendent Lisa Hamilton over the past year, citing abuses of her position and negative comments about District employees.

They have been displeased with her performance during her first year with the District. At least two of those who lodged complaints have been terminated or demoted.

In March, the Peñasco School Board declined to renew Hamilton's contract, then reinstated her five days later.

Hamilton's educator license is currently under investigation, according to the Public Education Department's website. The Department wrote in response to a public records request that some records were withheld that relate to an ongoing investigation, but provided documents related to two other complaints.

Hamilton did not respond to an email requesting comment.

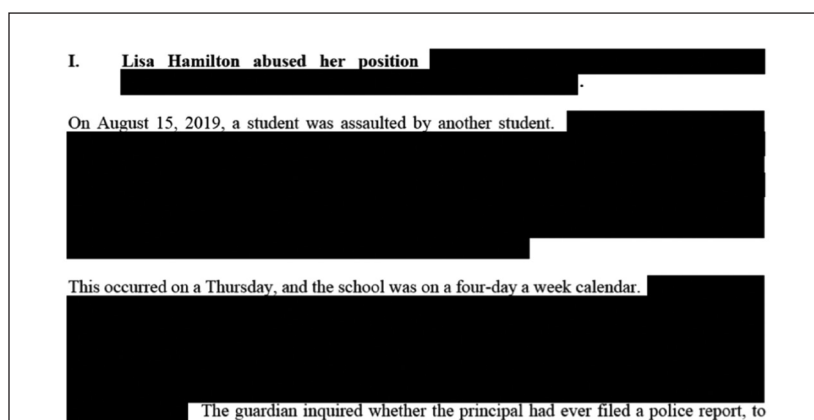
On Feb. 7, Hamilton's son used a master key to enter school buildings on a day there was no school. Hamilton gave her son keys to play basketball in the elementary school gymnasium. That day, he entered multiple classrooms and left a messy trail in his wake.

The first complaint, dated Feb. 17, comes from a school counselor and involves a meeting with a student in a military preparation program.

School Counselor Pauline Laumbach blocked a student from continuing in an Air Force preparation program due to grades.

On Jan. 21, Hamilton met with the student, their parents, and an Air Force recruiter TSgt. Jordan Lucey, where Hamilton overruled Laumbach's decision and made negative comments, accusing Laumbach of changing grades and calling her "anti-military."

The student told classmates about the meeting, and another teacher told Laumbach about what he overheard from the student.



(Photo courtesy of New Mexico Public Education Department)

The state Public Education Department sent a heavily-redacted version of the complaint against Peñasco Superintendent Lisa Hamilton. One redaction removes almost all details about an August assault that took place at Peñasco Elementary School and its relevance to the complaint.

Laumbach in the complaint accused Hamilton of violating the State Personnel Act by discussing a school employee with others present.

The investigation report, as prepared by Department Chief Investigator Jeremy Garcia, mentions a letter from Lucey detailing complaints about Laumbach. However, the letter as provided by the Department contains many redactions and Laumbach's name does not appear between redactions.

The Department did not fulfill a request inquiring about redactions by press time, but they did write that they will review the redactions.

Garcia wrote that Marina Lopez, then principal of Peñasco High School and Middle School, claimed that Hamilton spoke with her about the meeting but denied speaking about Laumbach.

On May 29, Hamilton dismissed Lopez from her position as principal after four years and reassigned her as a fourth-grade teacher.

Lopez said that her biggest surprise was receiving the news as an email on a Friday afternoon.

She said she accepted the teaching position after being given a deadline to respond within a week, and did not want to leave the District five years before retirement.

A change.org petition created

by an elementary school teacher called for the reinstatement of Lopez as principal. The petition received more than 500 digital signatures.

"Under the leadership of Marina Lopez, the overall school grade for both the middle and high school locations increased," the petition states. "The Peñasco Middle school went from being a D school to an A school and received recognition from the NM Public Education Department, to which Mrs. Lopez undoubtedly played an instrumental role by guiding her staff and students to reaching and maintaining this goal."

"It's humbling to see that your hard work for the last five years, in the position that I've been in, has been acknowledged and appreciated," Lopez said. "Not just by my staff, who I work with every day, but by parents and students."

The Department closed the complaint March 27 with no prosecution or action taken.

A second complaint, dated

March 30, alleges multiple instances of Hamilton abusing her position.

The complaint was submitted by Miguelangel Burns, Kaori Lopez and Marissa Sandoval, who are listed as teachers and the President, Secretary and Treasurer respectively of the local chapter of the American Federation of Teachers.

According to the June Taos News story, Burns did not have his contract renewed. Burns declined to comment for this story.

The complaint describes an assault that took place Aug. 15. Nearly the entire section of the complaint is redacted, but mentions Burns as the victim's teacher.

According to the police report, dated Aug. 27, an 11-year-old student named Ky Hamilton assaulted 8-year-old Miguel Roybal. Roybal was waiting for the bus at the school playground when another student allegedly began fighting him, leaving Roybal with several scratches but no serious injuries.

The report states that Peñasco Elementary School Principal Aaron Mitchell had spoken about the incident with Ky's father, who the report names as Stuart Hamilton. A 2009 Santa Fe Community Foundation Annual Report lists a gift from Stuart Hamilton and Lisa Comer Hamilton; the complaint was filed against "Lisa Hamilton aka Lisa A. Comer."

A Peñasco teacher who wished to remain nameless for fear of retribution confirmed that the incident involved Hamilton's son.

The complaint also describes events on Feb. 7, the date of the break-in, including a teacher noticing noises from a classroom,

but multiple sentences and an entire paragraph are redacted. A non-redacted part of the report mentions that the classroom when the teacher returned contained empty food containers and items of furniture were out of place.

Lopez contacted District IT Director Darren Griego to request footage from that day, and Griego began to compile the footage on Monday.

Jonah Medina, a staff worker under Griego, took over a position that is redacted or unspecified. The complaint alleges that Hamilton denied Medina authority to view the footage.

Emails show Medina left the District in early March after being made uncomfortable by an outside company, Harmonix, that Hamilton brought in to provide outside services.

Attached to the complaint is a March 2020 Rio Grande SUN article describing issues that the Española School District had with Harmonix.

The complaint describes other matters, including multiple instances where Hamilton made false statements to the Board. It cites a different SUN article that describes conflicting information Hamilton gave to the Board and to police regarding the break-in.

The complaint contains a letter from the Board, dated Feb. 27, that letters of concern regarding the superintendent were received from staff members.

More than 20 letters were sent to the Board, Board President Amanda Bissell said.

The Board met in executive session for nearly four hours on March 4 to discuss hiring protocols and the superintendent's contract, according to meeting min-

utes. Afterward, Bissell announced that the Board decided not to renew Hamilton's contract. However, no vote was taken.

Bissell said in an interview that this was a mistake made after a long and emotional day. She said that during the executive session a majority of Board members had said they were not in favor of renewing Hamilton's contract, but no vote was taken.

In response, the Board called a special meeting on March 9. Bissell apologized for not calling a vote in the previous meeting. Then, after another two-hour executive session, the Board voted 3-2 to approve Hamilton's contract as superintendent for the next school year.

Bissell was one of the two votes against renewing Hamilton's contract. In an interview, she declined to answer why she voted that way, not wanting to comment on personnel matters.

Also attached to the complaint is an email from Bissell describing results of a survey evaluating the Superintendent, High School/Middle School Principal and Elementary School Principal.

According to the Taos News, during public comment at the March 4 meeting, Stephanie Ly, New Mexico president of the American Federation of Teachers union, cited a survey that showed 78 percent disapproval of Hamilton among District staff.

A teacher also said that Lopez had high ratings on the survey.

In the copy of the complaint obtained by the SUN, the results of the survey are redacted.

Before being hired by the Peñasco School District, Hamilton worked for the Public Education Department.

www.krsnam1490.com • www.krsnfm1071.com

KRSN
AM 1490 FM 107.1

Kommunity Radio Station Now

Listen On The Radio • Listen on The Web

505-663-1490

Drop off your taxes

We've got it from here.

Just drop off your documents and a tax pro will do the rest. Review and approve your completed return from home.

Deja tus documentos de taxes. Nosotros nos encargamos. Simplemente deja tus documentos y un profesional de taxes se hará cargo del resto. Revisa y aprueba tu declaración desde casa cuando esté completada.

1010-D N. Riverside Dr.
Española, NM 87532
505.753.4866

H&R BLOCK

Treats for Dad

Borrego's Guitars Music Supply Co.

Guitars, Banjos
Ukuleles,
Mandolins &
more!

5th ANNIVERSARY SALE!!
We are glad to be back and we look forward to seeing you soon!

GREAT DEALS ON EVERYTHING!

1636 St. Michaels Drive, Santa Fe, NM
(505) 471-9043
Open Mon - Sat 11am - 6pm
Sun 12pm - 4pm

String Changes • Repairs • Expert Set-ups

Ice Cream Cakes for Dad!

ALL-AMERICAN
Dad
My Hero

DAD!

Other Designs Available!

DQ Grill & Chill

DO GRILL & CHILL RESTAURANT
1702 N RIVERSIDE DR
ESPANOLA, NM 87532-8064

HACIENDA HOME CENTER, INC.

Great Father's Day Gift!
Oklahoma Joe's Bronco Drum Smoker

- Movable cooking grate and additional meat hangers
- Airflow control system
- Oversized 8-pound charcoal basket
- Removable ash pan
- Porcelain coated components.
- Heavy-Gauge steel construction for long life

(505) 753-2131
430 S Riverside Dr, Española, NM 87532

Happy Father's Day to the

World's Best Dad

We offer installment loans from
\$300 to \$2,000*
Contact us today at **(505) 753-4070** to discuss a loan for you.
We Do Taxes | Hablamos Español

1227 N Railroad Ave Ste B7
Española NM 87532-3149
www.securityfinance.com

SECURITY FINANCE
Your Friend When You Need \$\$\$

*All loans are subject to credit limitations and our underwriting policies, including verifiable ability to repay. Actual loan proceeds may vary based upon loan terms. Dollar amounts are rounded to the lowest whole dollar and are subject to change.