

Dear Cary,

September 9, 2021

It has been almost three weeks since you met with us to hear our concerns, and because of the board's inaction, the future of the Crowden Music Center and The Crowden School continues in jeopardy. We, the remaining teachers who have a personal connection to Anne Crowden's legacy by working with her directly through a large part of the school's history, are deeply disturbed by the grave danger in which the school now finds itself. We hope that there may yet be a chance to save Crowden through appropriate intervention.

We do not want to assume indifference as the cause for the Board's inaction. Are you receiving all the facts or just a small fraction? In the absence of clear and timely communication, we are left to speculate. And we need to ask: Are you aware of the devastation that is currently taking place? Enrollment has plummeted. Valued long-time teachers have quit in protest. Board members have resigned. Staff morale is at an all-time low. Intimidated teachers, fearful of retaliation, complain among themselves of a hostile and manipulative work environment. Crowden's reputation has been tarnished. The publicity we attract is now strongly negative, and ambassador families no longer recommend the school. Parents describe their children as "devastated" by the school's actions. Does any of this suggest effective executive leadership?

Sadly, at time when communities are uniting to face global challenges, the start of this school year has been grueling for many. Among the casualties: once-dedicated teachers who have had to sacrifice their jobs to escape an unhealthy work environment; parents repelled by a "bait and switch" method after finding out that the teaching staff and organizational structure had radically changed; children who were displaced and are having to adjust to unfamiliar environments and new expectations on very short notice. Students who remain at Crowden have lost friends and will not have a satisfactory ensemble sound without those who have grown through the program. Gone are most of the young artists who developed over a few years with the care of our prized faculty, thus severely compromising the level of musical excellence that has long been Crowden's signature.

It is very clear to us that the actions of the Executive Director and the interim principal are accountable for this current situation. **Given our collective histories, it is simply unacceptable to us to stand idly by.**

Where teachers have needed honesty and clarity, the leadership has taken to making inaccurate claims (labeled below as "Myths"). We have directly heard the Executive Director Fukawa telling current faculty and, we are guessing, you as Board members:

**1. MYTH: The public story was "one-sided," and reporters at Berkeleyside and the SF Classical Voice did not get Crowden's view (ED and the Board) of the story.**

---

**FACT: Reporters from Berkeleyside and the SF Classical Voice both reached out to Crowden ED and Board for your side of the story. The ED refused to comment in both instances.**

*a. As quoted from the Berkeleyside article, "School officials declined to speak on the record with Berkeleyside about the reasons Johnson was fired in time for publication, citing concerns over student privacy and legal liability."*

**FACT: In the SF Classical Voice article, Crowden merely submitted general written responses and refused to speak to the reporter.**

b. As quoted from the SF Classical Voice article: “Monday being a day of orientation for the school where the academic year begins on Sept. 1, there was no response from the administration to specific questions about Johnson’s dismissal, only a general statement.” And “Crowden’s representative again declined all comments on the case....etc.”

**2. MYTH: The parent and child with the complaint about the vocab test was ready to sue Crowden and the ED had no recourse but to terminate Brad.**

---

**FACT: The ED instructed the parent to write the letter, an action that escalated the situation.**

**3. MYTH: The ED’s actions were taken to “protect” the child.**

---

**FACT: It is the ED’s and everyone’s job to protect children by helping them when they have misunderstandings and misinterpret that they are being targeted. Facilitating this could have helped the child not only rise above his misunderstanding but also come up with a positive solution with his teacher’s support. The ED could have handled the complaining parent with diplomacy and offered a chance to be comforted and reassured, and perhaps a chance to opt out of the learning tool that years of TCS students have enjoyed. This would have been the approach the school founders would have taken. Fact is, this child was not “protected” but instead effectively thrown under the bus by the actions of the ED, as a step towards a specific agenda of terminating Brad.**

**4. MYTH: Parents who have recently pulled their children out of Crowden are spreading ill-will and chaos, and do not believe in the mission of The Crowden School.**

---

**FACT: The families that left were and are still dedicated and loyal to The Crowden School.**

They felt betrayed by the Executive Directors’ decisions and handling of Brad Johnson’s termination. They felt defrauded by the secrecy of the firing and the timing of returning contracts for the next school year. To announce Brad Johnson’s firing a few weeks before school started was unfair to the families. When the town hall meetings turned out to be unfruitful, these families had no other choice but to find other schools for their children. They did not want to leave The Crowden School, but felt they had no other choice. We have recently met with former students, children so devastated they asked for comfort as they cried. They have been deceived and abandoned. The families were looking for answers from you, and they never got them. Brad Johnson, as principal and upper school English teacher, was the pillar of our academic faculty – to quote alumni parent Sarah Norris: “Brad Johnson was the beloved captain of the Crowden ship, steering it through many squalls and storms with humor, wit, intelligence, wisdom, and breathtaking pedagogical skill.”, and one of the main reasons these families were staying at Crowden.

In our view, the actions of the current leadership are moving Crowden far away from the founder’s vision. Many also feel that this may be a simple yielding to the employee who wanted to take the principal position and found reasons to maneuver the ED to take actions against him. **It’s an age-old sad story of jockeying for power, especially in a climate where respect and personal value have gone missing.**

**In any case, we need to ask your help: Please ask the leadership to stop spreading these misrepresentations of the truth. Please understand that you, the Board and the Executive Director and her agents, are responsible for this current situation. The Board, however, still has the power to course correct.**

And, this past week has seen a further deterioration of an already tenuous situation at school. These recent matters may not yet have come to your attention:

- Even with the efforts of the remaining and new teachers, students are leaving daily. On Friday, the third day of school, two more students withdrew from the school. The current student enrollment has gone down from 65 to 39, and we are aware that more students are planning to leave. Some parents indicate the only thing holding them back are the lack of openings at appropriate schools.
- The chaos and tumultuousness are reaching the families in the Community Music Center where many families have chosen to withdraw their children from private lessons and other programs.
- Prized faculty members resigned because Brad Johnson's termination has made the already low morale even lower. The amount of distrust and uncertainty is high amongst the faculty right now. Without addressing issues, expect more resignations to happen in the coming weeks.
- The ED behaved unprofessionally at the three faculty meetings before the school year started. To name one incident, at the faculty meeting on August 31, she used the teachers as her audience, and read the Berkeleyside article to rebut "claims" and to justify her actions and in so doing, made statements that were blatantly untrue. This reading was not only unnecessary, and it also instigates divisions and unrest, creating an atmosphere of distrust between teachers. This had no place in a faculty meeting.

In closing, the current Executive Director could have handled this entire situation in a much more thoughtful way, thereby avoiding all the bad publicity, cancelled student contracts, lost revenue, potential lawsuits, as well as the potential loss of major donors. Competent institutional leaders consider the best way to guide the institution with the goal of keeping the school in good standing and its constituents happy. Actions speak more loudly to us all than any words.

Finally, we need to know what your next steps will be. The ED's actions have not only ruined our colleague Brad Johnson's reputation and well-being, thereby cutting out a vital lifeline for the school, but also the ED's impulsive and reckless behavior has decimated The Crowden School and Crowden Music Center as we know it. Again, as professionals who knew our founding directors personally, we continue to feel called to continue to bring the truth to light. We are sorry to say that, whether intentional or not, the ED's and interim Principal's behaviors indicate that they do not hold the interests of Anne Crowden's vision for The Crowden School and Crowden Music Center at heart.

Please let us know your plan to address the unified voice from the community about these matters. Given all that has happened, we ask you to consider again, at a minimum, a two-month administrative LEAVE for the Executive Director and her agents, then launching a careful investigation of the recent actions. This would be the first step towards saving Crowden, realigning with our founder's vision, and healing our community.

Sincerely,

Arkadi Serper, TCS 1992-? Laura Kakis Serper, TCS 1993-? Teale Matteson, TCS 1998-?

Dear Cary and TCS Board of Directors,

September 24, 2021

We are writing to follow up on our letter of September 9, 2021. The lack of response is truly baffling. We wonder, what keeps the Board from responding to the crisis that threatens our school? How can we reach through the wall of silence and secrecy? How can we have an honest and open discussion with the refusal to acknowledge the consequences of your actions? We cannot in good conscience remain silent. We will continue demanding your attention until you address these unjust acts that harm every person in our community, especially our children.

This second letter voices our distress at the financial management of the Crowden Music Center. As we seek to comprehend why you terminated our beloved principal, Brad Johnson, we have discovered many disturbing financial improprieties that may have played a role.

1. The \$10 million dollar grant was never announced to the community. Additionally, the Crowden community never learned that the Gordon Getty grant letter was actually addressed to Brad Johnson. The community knows that he played an important part in its acquisition by appearing in the school's "Reason to Believe" films, going to events, and meeting with the Gettys. Most importantly, they understood Brad's value. They clearly wanted to contribute to a school that boasted a principal and teacher with his credentials and philosophy of education. It is the combination of high standards in both academics and music that compels such support. Parents and donors have already begun to withdraw their financial support after Brad's dismissal and its attendant decline in academic standards.

2. On multiple occasions, Brad Johnson urged the administration to raise the academic teachers' salaries to respectable levels. Even the "Strategic Plan" states there would be gradual increases and these have not occurred since 2008. Only a small increase was granted, bringing the full-time equivalency to a mere \$58,000--still far below comparable pay at peer institutions.

3. Brad and others were also concerned at the low earnings of the music faculty, who are now paid hourly at the rate of \$50.50 (a one dollar increase from last year's hourly rate). Not only has this hourly rate stayed the same in spite of frequent requests to address this, it has not included a cost of living increase for years. In effect, the music faculty's earnings have been decreasing. Moreover, there is no compensation for coursework preparation, no additional coverage for professional presence and performances in school concerts and these teachers are paid for only 40 minute periods, although they spend far more time with course prep, supervision between classes and classroom set-up.

4. This lack of concern for our teachers accounts for the rapid turnover in the faculty in recent years, posing a serious problem for school recruitment and retention. **Additionally, now that the parents have learned how poorly the faculty is paid, they are outraged at how their tuition money is being spent.** They know that it is the teachers who most impact their children's education, and they understand why they are

not being compensated fairly. Again, the “Strategic Plan” quoted on the website in sections F & G state a need to prioritize this yet there are no actions to verify these claims.

5. Low teacher salaries and low hourly wages (in the case of music faculty) and an **unstable work-environment** bring us to the point of the ED and TCS Board SHOWING the lack of priority on high-level professionalism and educational standards. At one time, the school had more Phd teachers in addition to Brad Johnson who were eager to serve the unique and bright student body, and yet this has not and will not be retained without an immediate approach to professional equity.

6. Brad Johnson’s salary was not enough to qualify for a loan on the lowest type of housing. He was paid \$74,000 per year (\$37,000 for his school Principal position and \$37,000 for his English teacher position). Brad Johnson dedicated over 25 years of his professional career to The Crowden School. He passed up multiple job offers over the years because he valued the mission of The Crowden School. The disrespectful way he was terminated sent shock waves through the community, and it still has not been properly addressed by you or ED Fukawa. We are dismayed, and have to ask: is this how you treat the most dedicated and respected members of the Crowden community?

7. Piero Mancini and Anne Crowden together founded The Crowden School in 1983. Piero and his wife Brigitte, were retired and had been receiving an extremely modest retirement benefit. Without warning, Piero Mancini’s monthly payment was cut in half and then it was stopped altogether. After the fact, ED Fukawa then notified Brigitte Mancini over the phone that The Crowden School would no longer be paying Piero’s retirement funds because the school “needs money”. Whose decision was this? TCS would not be in existence if not for those who gave their entire careers to the formation of this institution. We cannot fathom how you approved this decision and allowed ED Fukawa to execute it. The question begs to be repeated, is this how you treat the most dedicated and respected members of the Crowden community?

8. \$488k - In PPP (Payroll Protection) Loans need investigation – Where did those funds go? We do know that they were **not** used to protect all teachers from being laid-off, and that the tuition collected from families remained the same during COVID. Some teachers (even those writing this letter) were forced to retain other jobs during this period in order to survive, while those funds were collected and not dispersed. These are the requirements for not using funds fraudulently: *“Loan forgiveness will occur if the loan proceeds are used to **cover payroll costs**, and most mortgage interest, rent, utilities.....and Employee and compensation levels are maintained.”* Since TCS no longer has a mortgage payment and does not rent...?

9. There exists a gross inequity between teachers and administrators’ salaries. Across the board, administrator salaries are competitive while teacher salaries are embarrassing.

10. A parent who gave a \$10k donation at the end of 2020 to the school “for the teachers” was told by ED that “our teachers will really appreciate this.” None of these funds were actually allocated for the teachers, nor did they learn that this was the donor’s intention. We have verification through an email from the family who made this and other generous donations and is now questioning their allocation.

Finally, could it be that receiving the large donation sum has caused the indifference we are experiencing through the lack of responses to multiple avenues of communication? How ironic in a music school that no one hears the cries of a broken community asking for acts of integrity and of leadership?

We are not all of one faith yet can’t help but think of this quote: “For what shall it profit, if one shall gain the whole world, and lose their own soul?” Institutions can also lose their soul. Crowden is currently forfeiting the essence of what made it an enduring legacy. Those of us who write this, together with our colleagues, have donated countless unpaid hours to Crowden, thereby causing ourselves to live with very meager resources. We did this because we believed in the core values and mission of a school that would serve children with a lifelong gift of high academics and music. Now, however, we hear many describing the place as a hollow shell... Whether or not you agree with this, you must find it alarming that a parent would write about your approach in this manner:

*“Crowden shows the hallmarks of being run less like a school, and more like a social club for the cronies of the Executive Director - the board finds ample time to attend fancy galas, and yet it does not find the time to perform the most basic of fiduciary responsibilities. The fact that so many of your own colleagues have departed in disgust strongly supports this assertion.*

*Since my son joined Crowden, his class has shrunk by 75%. I would not be surprised to soon see you lose 75% of the remaining four students. Your actions indicate that you consider this toll on our children to be acceptable collateral damage in pursuit of some ill-defined and now totally implausible future vision. In the toxic environment that you have created, our choice is very clear: [our son] shall not be returning.”*

On behalf of those who care about this community, we appreciate your response.

Sincerely,

Arkadi Serper, TCS 1992-? Laura Kakis Serper, TCS 1993-? Teale Matteson, TCS 1998-?

October 1, 2021

Dear remaining TCS board members:

We are reaching out yet again with great concern. As more board members continue to resign (at least that is the hearsay, nothing has been shared publicly), we want to remind you of your responsibility to the Crowden Music Center Community before you make your next move.

We strongly believe that before appointing new board members you should create clear by-laws. Without by-laws, The Crowden School Board has no structure and rules to govern its actions. While this may all be a moot point, we want to go on record as urging you to take this action.

The by-laws are crucial, if for no other reason than to protect TCS. For example, should the need arise to terminate a school employee, including the Executive Director, there would be clear legal justification. Fireable offenses\* need to be included so that board members as well as employees have transparent expectations and guidelines.

Indeed, given the chaos of the past few months, transparency should be your highest priority. Board elections may be a way to rebuild some lost trust. The Crowden School Community has undergone trauma and you need to address it instead of just going about business as usual. We assume that you are currently interviewing prospective board members. **We implore you to create Board by-laws before starting the candidate selection process!** Such a structure will safeguard against future crises that will further damage the Crowden community.

These by-laws must include protocols for nominating board members. When adding members to the Board, this important opportunity should be widely announced on the website and as a press release so that the community has a chance to both comment and to submit nominations.

As a faculty member urged in a resignation letter, “there should be a restructuring of the Board and Executive Director roles. There should be annual elections for Board members, there should be rotating faculty and parent representatives.” Parents have voiced similar demands.

Let us also go on record to state that we believe that **the Executive Director should have no control over this process.** It would present a clear conflict of interest should the Executive Director take an active part in choosing new board members.

The by-laws should also clearly state the role of the board in the running of The Crowden School. If the Board wants to be involved in school operations, then the by-laws should make

that explicit so that members with appropriate experience should be selected. Or if the Board wants to confine itself to fundraising, then state that as well.

**In conclusion, we emphasize that your top priority now should be truth and transparency.** The Crowden Community is hurting from a lack of discretion and candor. We believe you are ethically obliged to create a set of by-laws for the Board, which should include clear protocols for equitable processes for employees, and a more democratic process for selecting prospective board members. These by-laws might begin the process of restoring the community's trust and faith presently lost in this ongoing debacle.

This letter, like those we have already sent, focuses on the need for change. And we will continue to object to any unjust actions that directly cause harm to the children, and the school community at large. The Crowden School is on the brink of collapse, with the deep damage inflicted on the school's image and the result of an ongoing exodus of teachers, families, and donors. Please act now.

Sincerely,

Arkadi Serper, TCS 1992-? Laura Kakis Serper, TCS 1993-? Teale Matteson, TCS 1998-?

\*Samples of fireable offenses of the current ED (as detailed in letters of 9/10 & 9/24):

1. Drastic and sudden decline in Crowden School enrollment;
2. Wrongful termination, acts of character defamation and violation of human rights of beloved principal and faculty member Brad Johnson;
3. Lack of or inappropriate communication with the community in the groundswell objection to his wrongful termination;
4. Sudden and frequent resignations of Board members unexplained;
5. Sudden resignations of long-time treasured faculty members unaddressed;
6. Bad publicity from the press;
7. Fraudulent management of donor funds;
8. Poor decision-making that creates controversy and tumult which is currently harming the reputation and threatening the future of the School.