

An Open Letter to the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Community

We are very fortunate to have an exceptional school superintendent, Dr. Nyah Hamlett. Like other Black leaders before her, she is under attack.

Breaking Down The Accusations

An unknown individual mobilized Dan Kane of the *News & Observer* to scrutinize Dr. Hamlett's doctoral dissertation for evidence of plagiarism. The [resulting report](#) was published on January 11. The only part of Dr. Hamlett's work that Kane called into question was page 6 of the introduction to her 164-page dissertation. This page displays citation and paraphrasing errors, the article argues.

Dr. Nancy Chesheir, vice chair of the international Committee on Publication Ethics and professor at the UNC School of Medicine, was quoted in Kane's article. She explained that while Dr. Hamlett's misattributed sources "need to be corrected if possible if it's in the published literature... they are not a reason to believe that this person's trying to somehow cheat the system."

While Mr. Kane says his other two experts thought duplicate wording and incorrectly cited sources suggested "intentional" plagiarism, neither was quoted as saying so. One gave no comment on Dr. Hamlett's dissertation, offering only a definition of the word plagiarism itself: "It's intending to make something that is not yours look like it is yours." The other suggested sending the dissertation back to the responsible institution, the College of William & Mary, for review. He is quoted in the article as saying, "Ultimately, plagiarism comes down to human judgment, similar to other questionable practices—you know it when you see it." In this case, some may see it, but others clearly do not. This prompts a critical question: Why was this investigation undertaken in the first place?

Why Was This Investigated?

What prompted the anonymous source to engage Mr. Kane to dredge up plagiarism charges against Dr. Hamlett? Why go to the trouble? It's not typical that we scrutinize the academic work our leaders completed as students. When asked, Mr. Kane admitted he had never investigated the dissertations of any other superintendents or public officials.

It's reasonable to wonder why an esteemed leader has been attacked in this way. Sadly, Mr. Kane's article provides just one example of an all-too-familiar pattern. Black educators in our town report exaggerated levels of scrutiny and suspicion regarding their academic backgrounds and their work. It is not uncommon for principals to get calls from white parents inquiring about the credentials of Black teachers. [Research by the National Bureau of Economic Research](#) finds that Black workers are perceived as less skilled, subjected to a higher degree of scrutiny, and more likely to be disciplined or fired than white workers for the same errors and infractions.

A Black principal in our district was once accused of having plagiarized a “welcome to school” message! Her accusers pointed out that it was the same welcome letter that she herself had used at another school and looked similar to other welcome letters they located. What is going on here? Could it be that our Black leaders are experiencing the same disrespect, low expectations, and suspicions that Black students have experienced for decades? Despite this unscrupulous and very public “investigation,” Dr. Hamlett remains her courageous, gracious, and determined self.

An Exceptional Superintendent

What Mr. Kane might have done was to apply his investigative energy and resources to reporting on Dr. Hamlett's outstanding performance as superintendent. If he had looked into how she has handled the job she was hired to do, he would have heard many stories from students, staff, teachers, school board members, and the community about how Dr. Hamlett has been one of the finest superintendents we have ever known.

For the two years that Dr. Hamlett has led our district, she has brought warmth, reassurance, and steady leadership to our schools. She makes a point to be physically present in classrooms, in neighborhoods, and at community functions. She meets regularly with faith leaders to update them on current issues in the schools, and she gives students the chance to communicate their needs and facilitate problem solving. She has been consistently eager to listen and learn, incorporating the feedback she gathers into her decision making.

Her communication skills are unparalleled. Notably, she writes weekly emails to every family in the district. Daria Barazandeh, a parent in the district, said she had “never seen emails like this from a person in authority.” Another parent, Jill Kissell Hunter, remarks that, “Her emails are so thoughtful. I look forward to them every week. They were so reassuring at the height of the pandemic. She has been such a great leader.”

Dr. Hamlett has not shied away from serious problems facing the district. Last year she managed a difficult leadership crisis at ECHHS with determination and aplomb, understanding and addressing head-on the anxiety and discontent resulting from internal problems and mid-year loss of a principal. Task forces that Dr. Hamlett appointed and worked with to address issues of school safety for the district included students, teachers, and community members. All were invited to participate in meaningful and authentic ways. She embodies the core values of the district's new strategic plan, “Think (and Act) Differently”: Engagement, Social Justice Action, Collective Efficacy, Wellness, and Joy.

Marcus Gear, a CHCCS teacher who was once a student in the district, said “Dr. Hamlett has been one of the best superintendents I have ever seen. Growing up Black in Chapel Hill it's very rare to see people who look like you in positions such as hers. As a first year teacher, I have felt nothing but support from her and her administration. Her involvement throughout the community is impeccable. If she wasn't a Black woman, would they be asking these same questions about her dissertation?”

Kathryn Cole, a school librarian in the district, writes: “Dr. Hamlett embodies excellence and keeps teacher and student wellness at the forefront. She is unapologetically justice-centered and has issued bold leadership during some of the hardest years we have experienced as educators. Her authentic engagement across the community invites people to the table. I know, without a doubt, we have the support needed from district leadership to tackle the daily, necessary work of antiracism and anti-bias in our schools. She is the most authentic superintendent I have ever had the pleasure of working with and I deeply appreciate her direct messaging that brings not only awareness but conversation and action around events in our society. She challenges us all to be better for the children we have the privilege of teaching.”

In Conclusion

This was an attempt to embarrass and distract. Let’s stop looking for problems that don’t exist and get back to the important business of providing every student a world-class education. We have the leader we need in Dr. Hamlett. We invite all “anonymous sources” to step up and be identified so we can have an open and transparent conversation about how attacks like this continue to contribute to the vast inequities in our district and towns and ultimately harm us all.

We are delighted that the Board of Education of CHCCS has stated that it wishes to keep moving ahead with Dr. Hamlett. We, and all who have signed below, fully support Dr. Hamlett. She is a demonstrated champion for our kids and community, and we are committed and ready to embrace her continued efforts as our CHCCS Superintendent.

Note from the Authors: After Dr. Hamlett published her Community Update on January 6, a multiracial group came together because of concern that our superintendent was undergoing this kind of attack. We decided we must respond to the accusations. Recognizing the historical trauma that Black people in our community have experienced as they have fought to be treated with respect and dignity and to have equal opportunity and access in our local institutions, members of the group volunteered to write a letter to the community, addressing the attack on Dr. Nyah Hamlett and highlighting the exceptional leadership she has brought to an education system that has been plagued for decades by racial inequity. Those who authored and edited this letter include (in alphabetical order): Laila Adileh, Susan Clifford, Kathryn Cole, Nancy Duffner, Vickie Feaster Fornville, Wanda Hunter, Dianne Jackson, Danita Mason-Hogans, Lee Moavenzadeh, Cindy Morton-Rose, Damon Seils, Doreen Stein-Seroussi, Kim Talikoff, Shayna Williams. Hundreds of community members have endorsed the content by adding their names.

Names of Signees:

Abigail Livengood

Adam Stein

Adrienne Barnosky

Aisha Booze-Hall

Al Stein-Seroussi

Alan Richmond

Alethea Alston

Alex Unwin

Alice De Bellis

Alice Glover

Alison Kavanaugh

Allison DeMarco

Allison Jaillet

Alyssa Hopson

Amanda Briggs

Andrea Vizoso

Andrew Short

Andrew Wright

Angela Romatzick

Ann Harrawood

Anna O'Connell

Anna Richards

Anne Cole

Anne-Marie Iselin

Anthony Holderied

Anthony Swaringen

April Anderson

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Ashley Quick-Hooker

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Bailey Normann

Barbara Foushee

Barbara Hall
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Beritah Mutiso
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