

In The Matter Of:
Department of Education
In Re: Family Foundations Academy Charter School

Hearing
February 10, 2015

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THE STATE OF DELAWARE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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-- PUBLIC HEARING --

IN THE MATTER OF:)
)
Family Foundations Academy Charter School)

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Department of Education
The Townsend Building
2nd Floor Cabinet Room
401 Federal Street
Dover, Delaware 19901

Tuesday, February 10, 2015
5:00 p.m.

.

BEFORE: Jennifer Nagourney, Executive Director
Charter Office, Department of Education

Donna Johnson, Executive Director
State Board of Education

ATTORNEY: Catherine T. Hickey, DAG
Attorney for Department of Education

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-- Transcript of Proceedings --

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1 MS. NAGOURNEY: Good evening. I
2 declare this public hearing to be open. My name is
3 Jennifer Nagourney. I'm the Executive Director of
4 the Charter School Office at the Delaware Department
5 of Education, and I have been appointed by the
6 Secretary of Education to conduct this public
7 hearing.

8 The charter of Family Foundations
9 Academy was placed on formal review by the
10 Department of Education with the assent of the State
11 Board of Education. As required by law, the matter
12 was referred to the Charter School Accountability
13 Committee, which has issued an initial report on
14 this matter.

15 This joint public hearing is being
16 held by the Department of Education and the State
17 Board of Education to assist in the decision of
18 whether the criteria set forth for remedial action
19 in the Delaware Code has been satisfied.

20 This hearing provides both the school
21 and the public with the opportunity to provide and
22 receive public comment. I will now ask the others
23 with me today to introduce themselves.

24 MS. JOHNSON: Donna Johnson,



1 Executive Director, Delaware State Board of
2 Education.

3 MS. HICKEY: Catherine Hickey, Deputy
4 Attorney General with the Delaware Department of
5 Justice serving as counsel to the hearing officer
6 this evening.

7 MS. NAGOURNEY: I would like the
8 record to reflect that the notice of the time, date,
9 and place of today's public hearing was published in
10 the News Journal and the Delaware State News.

11 In addition, notice was posted at the
12 Charter School Accountability Committee's official
13 place of business, on the Department of Education's
14 official website, and on the State Public Meeting
15 Calendar on the State's official website. Further,
16 the school was personally notified of the time,
17 date, and place of today's public hearing.

18 A court reporter is present so that a
19 record of this hearing can be made. It will be
20 necessary for each speaker to clearly identify
21 himself or herself before beginning to speak so that
22 the court reporter will be able to note who you are.

23 The record of this hearing will be
24 provided to the Secretary of Education and members



1 of the State Board of Education, together with any
2 written or electronic comments received at this
3 hearing.

4 We will proceed in the following
5 manner: First, we will hear from any
6 representatives of the charter school who wish to
7 comment. Then we will take comments from anyone
8 else who desires to speak. We had sign-up sheets
9 which are now in my possession. First, may I have a
10 show of hands to see all who want to make comments?

11 Okay. About six or seven. Okay.
12 And Dr. Browne will be arriving in a few more?

13 MR. CASPER: He will be here
14 momentarily. And I know he is going to want to
15 speak.

16 MS. NAGOURNEY: He will absolutely
17 have that opportunity. Okay.

18 We just try to limit your comments,
19 again, to three minutes. I intend to be as liberal
20 as time and reason allow in accepting comments;
21 however, I do reserve the right to limit comments if
22 it's purely repetitive or cumulative.

23 And at this point we will accept
24 comments from any representatives of the school.



1 MS. GILLESPIE: Um, we thought it was
2 in the order of the list that you have.

3 MS. NAGOURNEY: If you want to do it
4 that way, we can.

5 MS. GILLESPIE: Okay. Do I have to
6 come up there?

7 MS. NAGOURNEY: Yes. It's a bit of
8 an awkward setup, but we want to make sure that the
9 court reporter can accurately capture all of what
10 you say.

11 MS. GILLESPIE: Okay. Hello.

12 MS. HICKEY: If any of you want to
13 move up, you are welcome to move up to the table or
14 to the side chairs so that you don't feel like
15 you're way far back from us. Thank you.

16 MS. GILLESPIE: I can start? Okay.
17 Hello. My name is Sonya Gillespie. I'm the parent
18 of a seven-year-old little girl that attends Family
19 Foundations Academy.

20 My daughter is currently in the
21 second grade. She is a distinguished honor roll
22 student, and she has been attending Family
23 Foundations since kindergarten.

24 For me personally, I'm a 16-year



1 veteran of a Fortune 500 company. And when I was
2 looking for a school for my daughter, I was looking
3 for a school that was going to provide me with
4 longevity as well as good education for her
5 throughout her elementary and middle school years.

6 And in my search I chose Family
7 Foundations as my choice of school choice. So,
8 since attending Family Foundations, my daughter has
9 excelled greatly in learning new tasks, as well as
10 building great friendships and relationships with
11 her teachers currently and in the past.

12 In light of the recent circumstances
13 that the school has experienced, I can say that I am
14 satisfied with Family Foundations. There has not
15 been any interruption in her learning due to those
16 circumstances.

17 And as far as the transition, it's
18 been seamless to her, because she still expressed to
19 me how much she loves her school, and she begs Mommy
20 all the time, because Mommy is from the south, not
21 to move and relocate, because she wants to graduate
22 from Family Foundations.

23 She does take great pride in her
24 teachers, even from her kindergarten teacher who set



1 the foundation for her. Her name is currently
2 Ms. Powell, but it was Ms. Lacey.

3 And I was upset more so when
4 everything occurred, because that was defeating my
5 purpose of providing her a stable foundation for her
6 elementary education, because I understand that that
7 takes precedence and it sets the pace for her for
8 future years.

9 And she is looking up to her bigger
10 brother, who is about to graduate college in another
11 year. So she is wanting to excel like he is
12 excelling.

13 So, with that, you know, I can say
14 that I am looking forward to continuing to be a part
15 of Family Foundations in the upcoming years, and I
16 hope that, you know, they will be around for a long,
17 long time.

18 MS. NAGOURNEY: Thank you.

19 MS. GILLESPIE: Thank you.

20 MS. NAGOURNEY: Ms. Reffuge.

21 MS. REFFUGE: Should I come up there,
22 or do I stay here?

23 MS. HICKEY: It would probably be
24 better for the court reporter --

1 MS. REFFUGE: Okay.

2 MS. HICKEY: -- if you don't mind
3 coming around. When you say your name here, would
4 you please spell it also for the court reporter?

5 MS. REFFUGE: Sure.

6 MS. HICKEY: Thank you.

7 MS. REFFUGE: Karlee Reffuge,
8 R-E-F-F-U-G-E. So my name is Karlee Reffuge, and I
9 am a second grade teacher at Family Foundations
10 Academy.

11 The changes that FFA have recently
12 made are ones that have produced a boost in staff
13 morale and a feeling of positivity throughout the
14 school.

15 At one time there was much worry over
16 what would become of our school, our jobs, and, most
17 importantly, our students. Dr. Browne and our
18 leadership team have quickly alleviated those
19 concerns and displayed the utmost dedication to FFA
20 in making it the best that it can possibly be.

21 Many parents were hesitant about a
22 leadership change but have since welcomed the change
23 after seeing all the positive affects it has had on
24 the school and the staff.



1 Mrs. Amy Novosel and Mrs. Kathleen
2 Connor have quickly jumped into their new roles.
3 And we, as a staff, could not have asked for two
4 better people to fill these jobs. I am positive
5 that these two, along with the rest of the
6 leadership team, can and will lead us into continued
7 success.

8 Our staff, parents, and students have
9 united in the face of adversity. Most people
10 probably expected us to fail and crumble. Some
11 people probably even hoped for that. It is my
12 opinion that we are stronger and more united than
13 ever.

14 We see the great vision that
15 Dr. Browne has for us, and we are confident that he
16 will place the right people in position to see those
17 visions become a reality. Our staff, parents, and
18 students are confident that FFA will become an even
19 greater school under his leadership.

20 Thank you for allowing me to share
21 how the recent changes have impacted our school
22 community in a positive way. Thank you for your
23 continued support of Family Foundations Academy.

24 MS. NAGOURNEY: Theresa?



1 MS. PUSEY: Do you want me to spell
2 my name for you?

3 THE REPORTER: Yes, please.

4 MS. PUSEY: Theresa Pusey, P-U-S-E-Y.

5 THE REPORTER: Thank you.

6 MS. PUSEY: My name is Theresa Pusey.
7 This is my fifth year here at FFA, and I currently
8 teach fourth grade.

9 Since the changes made at FFA, I feel
10 that the staff morale is slowly but surely
11 increasing in a positive way. Many of the staff
12 members felt uneasy and on edge as the changes took
13 place.

14 However, after speaking with
15 Dr. Browne, he made us feel confident that the
16 changes being made are in the best interests of the
17 families, staff, and students of Family Foundations
18 Academy.

19 Ms. Novosel and Mrs. Connor have been
20 fabulous in keeping the school together as our new
21 leaders. They both continue to help support the
22 staff throughout all the changes that have been
23 made. Dr. Browne and Mrs. Valentine have been
24 working diligently to get to know the staff,



1 scheduling one-on-one meetings with each member, and
2 encouraging us to speak about our concerns.

3 Since he has been there, I feel that
4 the level of communication has increased between the
5 staff and the administration, as well. This allows
6 us all to feel supported and heard. We are excited
7 for the new changes that are coming. That's all.

8 MS. NAGOURNEY: All right. Mr.
9 Casper.

10 MR. CASPER: My name is Jason
11 C-A-S-P-E-R.

12 THE REPORTER: Thank you.

13 MR. CASPER: Good afternoon, ladies.
14 My name is Jason Casper. I am a fifth grade teacher
15 at Family Foundations Academy Charter School. This
16 is my third year teaching at FFA, my ninth year as
17 an educator.

18 Over the past three years, I have had
19 the privilege and honor to work with some of the
20 finest educators in the state in both the elementary
21 and the middle schools at FFA.

22 When I first came to FFA in October
23 of 2012, I had just left the position managing
24 several funeral homes in New Castle County, so my



1 classroom experience was a thing of the distant
2 past. Mrs. Novosel, the Director of Curriculum,
3 worked with me and assisted me in my planning and
4 lesson development. Since then, I graduated with my
5 fourth graders and followed them up to the fifth
6 grade for their transition to the middle school.

7 At the middle school level, we have
8 Mrs. Kathleen Connor, our Director of Curriculum,
9 and her level of professionalism is second to none.
10 Kathy is engaged, involved, and, most of all,
11 supportive to all the staff at FFA.

12 When the word of FFA's charter
13 renewal was under question, my colleagues and I were
14 deeply concerned. The morale among the staff was
15 affected. Our students had been making
16 improvements. Our data was supporting this growth.
17 We simply couldn't understand why.

18 As soon as the documents were
19 released that showed evidence of financial
20 mismanagement, we quickly realized why we were in
21 this unfortunate position.

22 It was at this point that I began to
23 attend board meetings and totally immerse myself in
24 fighting for FFA and its renewal. On the evening of



1 January 12th, I was voted onto the board of
2 directors and introduced to a young man by the name
3 of Dr. Lamont Browne.

4 That evening, Dr. Browne spoke to the
5 audience of concerned parents, staff, and community
6 members. Almost immediately, the overwhelming sense
7 of worry and concern that had been plaguing me for
8 several weeks seemed to dissipate. His dynamic
9 words and vision made me feel like DOE would finally
10 recommend and that the State Board would approve.

11 The next day Dr. Browne spoke to the
12 staff, and again he spoke about his vision for the
13 future of FFA, and I saw in the faces of my
14 colleagues much relief.

15 Lamont spoke about his experiences at
16 Eastside as well as the positive changes that have
17 taken place over the course of his tenure. His
18 openness to listen to concerns of the staff was
19 evident from the start.

20 Over the past several weeks, our
21 staff has felt a sense of relief. The high level of
22 professionalism that Dr. Browne and his staff of
23 leaders have brought to FFA have been extremely well
24 received. His willingness to share ideas and listen



1 to concerns has been demonstrated on every level.

2 The students' response to Dr. Browne
3 was also well received. At the middle school we had
4 a meet-and-greet session where Dr. Browne introduced
5 himself as well as spoke to the students about his
6 expectations from them.

7 FFA is a good place. And, as
8 Mr. McDowell and Dr. Browne have both stated before,
9 we want to take that, what is good, and make it
10 great. I firmly believe that under the tutelage of
11 great leaders, great results will follow.

12 I hope that you will stay tuned for
13 and be on the lookout for the greatness which is yet
14 to come.

15 MS. NAGOURNEY: Thank you. Ms.
16 Novosel.

17 MS. NOVOSEL: Hi. My name is Amy
18 Novosel, N-O-V-O-S-E-L. And I have had the
19 privilege of working at Family Foundations since the
20 year it opened.

21 This has certainly been an
22 interesting year, but one that has ended or has
23 transitioned greatly and has brought great things.
24 And Dr. Browne, I have already seen improvements and



1 growth in our staff, in our students. I have
2 already seen improvement in me. I have been in
3 education 15 years, and he is pushing me to greater
4 heights, and he is pushing our teachers to greater
5 heights and our students.

6 And when you have high expectations
7 of our students and when you believe that they can
8 do it and when you believe that our teachers can do
9 it and our staff members can do it, they are going
10 to rise to the challenge.

11 We have dedicated teachers here,
12 teachers who on Saturday, when you pass by our
13 parking lot, you will see many of them here on a
14 Saturday working hard for the students that they
15 love, students like Bernette who they want to bring
16 the best to them.

17 We have passioned educators that are
18 going to take Dr. Browne's leadership, and they are
19 going to improve. And FFA is truly going to become
20 a superior school. We are good. We are going to
21 get great under his leadership.

22 And we are just very thankful for the
23 opportunity to work with him to collaborate. When
24 you work at a charter school, a lot of times you



1 work in isolation, or at least Family Foundations
2 has operated under isolation in the past. And we
3 are so happy to have the opportunity to collaborate
4 with Eastside. Our special education department has
5 collaborated with them. Our nurses have
6 collaborated with them. And that's just the
7 beginning of great and wonderful things as we work
8 together for the greatness of all of our students.
9 Thank you.

10 MS. NAGOURNEY: Ms. Cipolla.

11 MS. CIPOLLA: Cipolla. (Correcting
12 pronunciation.)

13 MS. NAGOURNEY: Cipolla, okay.

14 MS. CIPOLLA: It's a soft C. Hello.
15 I'm Jennifer Cipolla, C-I-P-O-L-L-A. My name is
16 Jennifer Cipolla, and I'm a Special Education
17 Coordinator.

18 I have been with Family Foundations
19 for five years now. And over the past five years I
20 have seen some ups and downs. When I first heard
21 that Dr. Browne and Mr. McDowell were going to help
22 Family Foundations stay open, I was truly just
23 amazed by their generosity and willingness to be
24 there for our kids. Because everyone, like she was



1 saying, we are here for the kids. And we will be
2 okay, but we want to make sure that there is still a
3 place for our kids to come to that's a safe
4 environment to receive a good education.

5 Their decision also reflected to a
6 commitment to the students' academic success and
7 achievement. From the very beginning, Dr. Browne
8 and Ms. Valentine have established positive rapport
9 with the staff and students.

10 He has not only made time for us, but
11 also for the parents. He is available after school
12 to have meetings, to introduce himself by phone, in
13 person. I am not used to that. I have never
14 experienced that in the past five years. He has
15 been an incredible person. I brought one of my
16 favorite parents with me, because she wants to share
17 her experiences, as well.

18 And I feel that we are very fortunate
19 to have that, because I think a strong leadership
20 also makes a strong team, and that's what I was
21 discussing with him last week that they can be
22 strong, but if we're not strong, we can't do it
23 together. We all have to be strong and work towards
24 the same goal. And I feel with him we are going to



1 go there, and he is going to, you know, bring
2 success to our school.

3 He has also clearly defined our staff
4 roles and responsibilities. He has made them clear.
5 And he also has allowed us to be empowered. He gave
6 us the opportunity to be the best of who we are. He
7 has challenged us, and he has made me reflect inside
8 to be a better person. And I truly respect him for
9 that. Because I want to do the best I can, and I
10 feel with him I'm going to do that, because he
11 pushes me and he has us reflect on that.

12 I'm deviating. Sorry. But I'm an
13 emotional speaker, as well. You can ask my husband.

14 I'm also excited about the future,
15 because I know that we are going to be there with
16 the top schools in the state because of his drive
17 and his motivation and the way he gets us all
18 excited. I am singing again in the hall, which is
19 embarrassing for me, but I am -- and I haven't sang
20 in years -- because I'm happy. And I feel that
21 there is good coming of all of this. And I'm just
22 looking for the future and, you know, seeing us grow
23 together as a team and the opportunities that are
24 there for our kids. Thank you.



1 MS. NAGOURNEY: Ms. Berbick.

2 THE REPORTER: Can you spell your
3 name, please?

4 MS. BERBICK: C-O-N-C-E-L-E-T-A,
5 B-E-R-B-I-C-K.

6 THE REPORTER: Thank you.

7 MS. BERBICK: My name is Conceleta
8 Berbick. I'm a parent. I have three sons that go
9 to Family Foundation. I have a son, Danny, who
10 graduated last year. He went to DELCAP. He is
11 doing pretty good. And I have two of my sons here
12 in Family Foundation.

13 I was so worried the other day when
14 whatever happened, because I was like, oh, my God,
15 we are not responsible for this and, you know, this
16 shouldn't rub off on the teachers, because these are
17 some wonderful teachers.

18 My kids were struggling in the public
19 school. When they got to FFA, they are doing so
20 good. And I met Dr. Browne the other day. And I
21 called. When I called, he returned my call in such
22 a short space of time, I was like, "Oh, my God, he
23 did!" Because, normally, we don't have that.

24 You know, and I spoke to him, and I



1 see that he had an open-door policy. And I really
2 like that, that you can communicate with him. He
3 is, to me, he is easy to talk to. So that's what I
4 like.

5 And, I mean, with Dr. Browne and the
6 wonderful staff that we have here, I know my kids
7 will be having a good education. So, you know, I
8 hope they remain. Because I understand it's tough
9 leaving, so I hope they stay.

10 And with the help of them, with the
11 help of Dr. Browne and the staff, I know my kids
12 will be having a proper education. So thank you.

13 MS. NAGOURNEY: Thank you. Are there
14 any other representatives of the school who wish to
15 speak?

16 MS. CONNOR: I'm Katherine Connor,
17 C-O-N-N-O-R. I represent the middle school. Most
18 of these -- well, all of these individuals are
19 either teaching or have students in the elementary
20 school. So I'm a part of the middle school.

21 And, as Ms. Reffuge said, when we
22 learned of the transition of leadership, at least in
23 the middle school, there was a feeling of
24 excitement.



1 And when the faculty was gathered
2 together to meet with Dr. Browne for our initial
3 meeting, when the meeting concluded, I circulated
4 throughout the room to touch base with some
5 teachers, "How are you feeling? What are you
6 thinking?" And everybody felt so very positive,
7 very excited about the message that he brought, very
8 excited about the potential for our school to
9 improve.

10 We are privileged to be able to now
11 expand our professional development opportunities,
12 because now we will be able to collaborate with
13 faculty from the other school. And not only that.
14 I think, with more vision, we can also collaborate
15 with faculties from other schools, as well.

16 So what we are looking for, certainly
17 my goal is to make sure that our students graduate
18 and are extremely successful when they go to high
19 school.

20 And we have quite a few students who
21 are successful. You know, everybody doesn't -- they
22 find their niche, wherever it is. And many of our
23 students, particularly our honor students, really
24 strive for Charter School of Wilmington, Conrad



1 School of Science, MOT Charter. They really have
2 those dreams, and many of them end up going there.

3 And I think that, with continued
4 development on our part, with continued
5 collaboration, with continued strong leadership, we
6 will have more and more students who will be able to
7 aspire to greater heights and will continue their
8 growth as students and will become very successful
9 young adults in the future. So thank you.

10 MS. NAGOURNEY: Would any other
11 representatives like to speak?

12 MR. BROWNE: Lamont Browne. Thank
13 you for giving me the floor today.

14 You have heard some you subtle
15 messages from the staff and from the parents about
16 what did not exist before, whether it was an
17 open-door policy or a clear vision or clear roles.

18 The fact that that's a reality, in
19 addition to some of the challenges the school has
20 had, yet we have kids who have still done as well as
21 they have -- we have 800 students and their families
22 who trust the school to send their kids there, and
23 staff who have remained year after year -- says a
24 whole lot about the soul of the school. And the



1 soul of the school cannot be deterred and cannot be
2 damaged by outside challenges, which I think says a
3 lot about our teachers and our school community.

4 Some of the stuff you heard about
5 vision. It's about getting the right people in the
6 right positions and empowering them to be the
7 absolute best that they can with super-high
8 expectations but also a ton of support and a very
9 friendly and warm environment for our kids and our
10 staff. And that's what we aspire to bring.

11 Parent involvement is so critical.
12 We have been there less than four weeks. Yet, we
13 had more than ten parents apply to be the parent
14 representative on the board.

15 We have a principal selection
16 committee. We have a principal candidate applying
17 for our elementary school principal position. We
18 had ten parents ask to be on the committee. Six are
19 coming this Thursday to be part of that committee.

20 That parent participation is so
21 highly valued, but also the desire of parents to be
22 part of this says a lot. And that process,
23 itself -- and if you see the agenda for that
24 interview, you are going to understand just the



1 rigor that we have and expectations we place on the
2 leaders in the building to make sure we get the
3 right person.

4 We talk about charter schools and the
5 innovation and collaboration that we all aspire to
6 have from our schools. We have heard our teachers
7 talk about already going to Eastside and working
8 with a special ed team. We have heard about the
9 nurses working together. There is already talk
10 between the reading teachers at both schools about
11 which of our curriculum, how we can improve that.

12 Mr. Casper just emailed me yesterday
13 about the opportunity to work with William Penn. He
14 said, "I have always wanted this. Can we do it?" I
15 immediately responded back, "Absolutely. What do
16 you need?" He was just so enthralled by this. I
17 was like, "Of course." Why wouldn't we work with
18 William Penn and any other school or organization?
19 Public, charter, private, it doesn't matter.

20 We are part of the community. We
21 want to make relationships with the community.
22 Because, when we all work together and are
23 passionate together, that's when we really see
24 change. And we know how much change is needed in



1 New Castle County and across the state.

2 And we hope that, just like Eastside
3 has been a beacon of hope for what urban schools can
4 do, we hope that FFA can be exactly what folks look
5 at, when they say what can a great school be, here
6 is an example.

7 So I appreciate the opportunity that
8 the state has given me to enter into this. I
9 appreciate the openness that the staff, students,
10 and parents have had.

11 And through all of that, the one
12 thing we haven't talked enough about is kids. And
13 for me to go into that school on January 13th and
14 see smiling kids who had no idea who I was -- they
15 haven't read the newspaper -- but they were excited
16 and they were happy. And it shows how much they
17 respect and love their teachers. It shows what's
18 happening at the school.

19 So, if that was good then, imagine
20 what it can be months and years from now. And
21 that's where I heard someone say we have a lot to
22 look forward to.

23 So I certainly appreciate this
24 opportunity. I definitely look forward to the full



1 recommendation, and I look forward to getting back
2 into the school and putting our hard work into where
3 it needs to be, and that's our staff and our kids.
4 Thank you.

5 MS. NAGOURNEY: Are there any other
6 representatives of the school who wish to speak? Is
7 there anyone else who desires to speak? Okay. If
8 not, this hearing is now closed.

9 I want to thank all of you for
10 participating today. The Secretary will consider
11 your comments as part of the decision-making
12 process, and your comments will also be available
13 for the State Board to consider.

14 If you have not signed in, please do
15 so so that we have an accurate record of everyone
16 who is here. And with that said, the hearing is
17 closed. Thank you.

18 (Adjourned at 5:32 p.m.)
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CERTIFICATE

I, Lorena J. Hartnett, a Notary Public and Registered Professional Reporter, do hereby certify that the foregoing is an accurate and complete transcription of the proceeding held at the time and place stated herein, and that the said proceeding was recorded by me and then reduced to typewriting under my direction, and constitutes a true record of the testimony given by said witnesses.

I further certify that I am not a relative, employee, or attorney of any of the parties or a relative or employee of either counsel, and that I am in no way interested directly or indirectly in this action.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and affixed my seal of office on this 11th day of February 2015.



Lorena J. Hartnett
Registered Professional Reporter

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