

School Board member investigated after district complaint filed

Julia Roeder '25, Supervising Web Editor

After an over four-month long investigation into School Board Vice President Ahmed Ismail, it was uncovered he engaged in retaliatory behavior against two female Grosse Pointe North High School administrators. This happened during a private conversation held by a former GPPSS employee during the 2022-23 school year.

Lawyer Kevin Sutton of the Miller Johnson Law Firm was retained by the Grosse Pointe school district to conduct an independent investigation regarding an HR report filed by two North administrators in late August 2023.

The investigation was initiated after comments made by Ismail to "push out" the two administrators from their jobs at Grosse Pointe North High School.

This followed Ismail's request to name the newly constructed Grosse Pointe North baseball field after Frank Sumbera, a Grosse Pointe North baseball coach that was terminated at North in 2018 per the two-page executive summary obtained by The Tower in a FOIA request.

This summary is only a sliver of the full 27-page investigation conducted by Sutton. During board meetings, members of the community have called for a release of the full report, including Maureen Krasner, a parent of two South alumni.

"It would be good to clear the air so there's transparency around (the investigation) as to what happened and what the taxpayers paid for that investigation," Krasner said. "It sounds like it was a really thorough investigation that was done. I think it would be important to see, including Vice President Ismail, for everybody to see the contents of that report."

During the Feb. 6, 2024 regular school board meeting, the Board voted in a 5-2 vote to not allow any school board member or community member to access the document.

"I don't really understand why the school board is not being more open about it to move forward and do better," Krasner said. "I would think they wouldn't want any administrator or teacher or any employee of the district to feel like they had been targeted and retaliated against."

Since the board vote, many community members have been trying to get ahold of the 27-page report, including Board Trustee Valarie St. John.

"The reason I think it's important to let the public read it, or at least the board, is because the board exercises oversight," St. John said. "Our legal role according to the State of Michigan is to exercise oversight over the district. If (school board trustees) were not allowed to read investigative reports—that cost a lot of money—then I am concerned that we're not exercising our fiduciary duties, and doing a good job."

During public comment at the Feb. 27, 2024 regular board meeting during public comment many community members expressed their desire to see the full report.

"It gives the appearance of a lack of transparency," St. John said. "I understand why the community is concerned when these complaints are brought forward against the trustee and it's not addressed from what they can see."

When Superintendent Dr. Jon Dean stepped down in August 2023, retired Grosse Pointe School deputy for business and operations Chris Fenton served as interim Superintendent, making him the main administrator during the investigation. After the end of the investigation, Fenton dismissed Sutton's finds in his determination statement, obtained by The Tower via FOIA, and concluded Ismail does not need to face repercussions for his actions. School Board Vice President Ismail has served many nonconsecutive terms as Board President and Vice President since 2004 and has lived in Grosse Pointe for much of his life.

"I can emphatically deny that I wanted to 'push out' any administrators," Ismail said in an email to The Tower. "I am not involved in the evaluation of our administrators. As the final report and as Superintendent Fenton's final determination show, there was never any attempt on my part or on the part of the school board to do so."

Ismail stepped down as board president last fall after serving as school board president since 2022. Kevin Sutton's investigation continued from Sept. 14, 2023 to Jan. 4, 2024.

"The findings of the investigation were clear, then Superintendent Fenton's final determination was clear: under our school system policy, the Superintendent's determination is final." Ismail said. "I consider the matter closed."

Ismail expressed his desire for the community to accept Fenton's determination, despite the whole report not being made public.

"I have done my best to apologize for any angst that the misinterpretation of my comments to a staff member have caused, and have offered to meet with the complainants to clear the air on any issue they have with me," Ismail said. "I have known them both for close to twenty years. They taught my two sons at North and are excellent educators. I hope that they will accept my offer to sit down and resolve any issues they have with me."

However, community members still want to know what the full report entails and if the investigation had anything that the summary did not highlight.

"I would like to see the school board demonstrating what we expect from our teachers and from our students, which is kindness, respect and leadership," Krasner said. "I just don't see that happening in this situation."

***If you have access to the full report or know any information that may be valuable to The Tower, please email thetowerbusiness1928@gmail.com. The Tower has filed multiple FOIA requests to obtain the HR report.

Board voted to review report

Julia Roeder '25, Print Editor in Chief

In a board meeting stretching past 1:00 a.m. on Dec. 9, 2024, the GPPSS School Board voted six to zero to allow board members to view a previously withheld report. The report was the result of a third party law firm's independent investigation regarding a Human Resources (HR) report filed by two North administrators in late August 2023. This vote reverses the board's March four to two vote to withhold the report from board members as well as the public, waiving attorney client privilege.

This comes after months of community members calling for a release of the report to the public. Although it is unclear what is in the full 27 page report, the board has previously announced that eight people were interviewed for the investigation conducted by Lawyer Kevin Sutton of the Miller Johnson Law Firm.

The Dec. 9, 2024 meeting was the outgoing board's final meeting, meaning this was Vice President Ahmed Ismail's, who the investigation surrounded, last meeting. Ismail asked to add the motion to the agenda on the day of the meeting.

"I want the board to understand exactly what is in there," Ismail said during the meeting. "I have been maligned, I have been slammed in public without having a chance to defend myself and frankly I want the board to know if it is okay to release this or not, what is the danger of releasing this and if the attorney says there will be liability issues, then the board can make that decision to not release it."

Throughout March and April, The Tower filed multiple FOIA requests attempting to obtain the full report but were denied by the district and the board after filing an appeal. The board had claimed attorney client privilege on the document.

The vote for the board to review the report sparked confusion, with Trustee Valerie St. John questioning the motives of some board members.

"Why did you vote against allowing the rest of the trustees to read it, and now you have changed your mind?" St. John said to other trustees during the meeting.

Since the public has been made aware of the report's existence, community members have pushed the board to release it, with lawn signs popping up around the community reading "release the report".

"For me, I have never believed that the privilege should be waived and that the privilege should go to the public especially without the trustees reviewing it," Board President Sean Cotton said. "My vote has always relied on our legal council of Miller Canfield saying that their legal opinion was that it should not be released to the public."

At this time, it is unclear when the board will review the report.



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The board members pictured during the Dec. 9, 2024 meeting, hearing community members voice their opinion. Left to right; Trustee Ginny Jeup, Trustee Terrance Collins, President Sean Cotton, Superintendent Dr. Andrea Tuttle.

Report released by BOE reveals deep tensions within the community

Julia Roeder '25, Print Editor in Chief

After much community pressure the GPPSS Board of Education voted 4-2 in closed session meeting on Feb. 10 to release a 74 page full report into former Board Trustee and President, Ahmed Ismail. The full report, published Jan. 4, 2024, was a result of a third party law firm's investigation into Human Resources (HR) complaints made by past Grosse Pointe North High School (North High School) principal, Kate Murray, and past North High School athletic director, Michelle Davis. The complaints centered around Ismail's comments of wanting to "push out" both Murray and Davis from their respective positions.

During the investigation, eight individuals were interviewed, with two being the complainants and Ismail. The anonymous individuals were referred to as "witnesses" in the report.

A conversation between Ismail and a GPPSS employee prompted the complaints. Following the conversation the GPPSS employee, Witness 5, contacted Complainant 1, Kate Murray, and Complainant 2, Michelle Davis, prompting them to file the HR report in late August of 2023.

Ismail was Board President when the conversation happened between him and Witness 5. Ismail chose not to run for board president again and continued on as a trustee until his term ended. Board President until the executive summary was presented to the board in Jan. 2024. Following the board's decision to keep the report private, the entire Grosse Pointe North administrative team resigned in June of 2024, with one administrator taking a position internally.

Ismail was voted to be on the board by the community in 2004, 2008, 2014 and 2020. His term ended in 2024, and withdrew his reelection bid in late spring of 2024.

"[Mr. Ismail] said, 'we are moving [the Superintendent, Dr. Jon Dean] out; we are going after [Complainant 1 and Complainant 2] next,'" Witness 5 said.

The complainants stated that they had been subject to bias and/or harassment on the basis of gender. In the conclusion of the report, Kevin Sutton, an attorney from Miller Johnson Law Firm that conducted the investigation, stated that he did not find evidence of gender bias, but did point to other concerning issues within the district.

Prior to the conversation, the GPPSS employee had gotten job offers outside of the district.

"That conversation with Mr. Ismail confirmed my decision [to take a job outside GPPSS]."

After over 15 FOIA requests, The Tower's appeal of a FOIA attempting to view the report was denied by the board in a 6-2 vote in May of 2024. Since the board voted to keep the report private, many community members, like Maureen Kranser, have been pushing for the report's release.



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The 74 page report released by the sitting school board revealed deep, underlying tensions within the Grosse Pointe community.

"The truths that are in the report are difficult to confront as a community," Krasner said. "But they are also essential steps toward rebuilding trust and ensuring that our educational institutions emerge stronger and more accountable."

When viewing the report it became clear that there were four top concerns that were addressed by Sutton that we have broken down.

North South Divide

When the four witnesses asked about a potential divide between the north and south ends of the district, it was clear that they all agreed that there is a divide, with a bias towards the south end.

"There are differences between north and south [end of the district] – students, parents, and funding ... which comes from the parents," Witness 2 said and later added. "South families have the tools and resources to advocate for something and there are direct connections to the Board."

Many witnesses added that it is a historical divide, and possibly rooted in racial and socio-economic differences between the schools. Ismail was a member of Grosse Pointe North's first graduating class in 1970 and identifies as a "Norseman".

"I see it mostly as athletics," Ismail said when asked about the divide between the two ends of the district.

In the conclusion of the report Sutton recommended a bulleted list to the community, with bridging the possible divide being one.

"Those on the North end clearly feel that they are treated as 'less than' and that they have received a short end of the stick as it pertains to multiple budget and operational decisions [referring to the 2023 budget cuts made by the board, cutting funds from the high school's budget]," Sutton wrote.

In remarks surrounding the report's contents during the Jan. 10 board meeting Trustee Ginny Jeup shared her opinions on the report's findings. Jeup is a mom of South High School graduates.

"I disagree with that it identifies a north and south divide," Jeup said.

On allegations of gender harassment

The basis of the complaints claimed that Ismail has subjected Complainants 1 and Complainants 2 to gender bias and/or harassment. Although witnesses stated that he made disparaging remarks about them as women, Sutton concluded that there was no evidence of gender bias and or harassment.

"They [Ismail] want to diminish me in any way they can," Complainant 2 said and later added. "I am a strong female in a traditionally male role."

When witnesses asked if they believed there was gender bias, all of the witnesses agreed that it was "a stretch", but did allude to Ismail's conduct towards women.

"Does [Mr. Ismail] treat women differently than men? Yes. I've observed it." Witness 1 said and later added. "Mr. Ismail] has consistently struggled with every female Board member he has served with, even those who are aligned with him."

On the 2022-2024 board, a majority of the trustees were women.

"I've regularly seen him treat women differently," Witness 1 said and later added. "[Mr. Ismail's] bias is implicit, not overt."

Witness 4 attributed much of the potential bias held against the Complaints to the termination of North head baseball and football coach, Frank Sumbera, in 2018. Sumbera was terminated after misconduct as a coach.

"The Board is very upset about Frank Sumbera; this is common knowledge," Witness 4 said.

Although the termination was decided by the then Superintendent Dr. Gary Niehaus, the execution of the termination was left up to Complainants 1 and Complainants 2, causing some community backlash.

"I, and the entire administrative team, completely agreed with the decision of then Superintendent Niehaus to terminate Mr. Sumbera," Complainant 2 said. "The Grosse Pointe News, however, did not agree with the decision and printed multiple articles and commentary calling into question the decision to let Mr. Sumbera go."

The Board working at admin level

Throughout the interviews it was clear that witnesses felt that the 2022-2024 school board had stepped outside of the traditional role of the board.

"It is the Board's prerogative to [run the day-to-day operations of the District]," Witness 1 said. "It's not illegal, it's just bad governance."

According to MASB (Michigan Association of School Boards) a board's role is to establish policies, goal setting, hiring and elevating the superintendent and approving budget and curriculum among other duties. During the conversation between Witness 5 and Ismail, Ismail hinted that if Witness 5 did not take a job outside the district, that he would receive a promotion within the district.

"[Mr. Ismail] said he didn't want to see me go; there were big plans for me," Witness 5 said.

Typically school board members making promises to staff members falls outside of the scope of the board's job description. Witness 5 is not the only witness to recognize this.

"The [the 2022-2024 board] Board is micro-managing the district," Witness 2 said and later added. "The Board is way more in the weeds, trying to be an administration."

These concerns were addressed in Sutton's conclusion of the investigation.

"This could be problematic over time and is something that administration and the Board should examine, particularly as a new Superintendent takes leadership over the District," Sutton said.

When asked about the overall state of affairs with the 2022-2024 Board, Witness 5 made his disapproval clear.

"Professionally speaking, the District was a f---g dumpster fire," Witness 5 said.

Diversity work in the district

Another issue brought forth throughout the witnesses interviews was the district's approach to issues related to equity and inclusion.

"I also believe this threat is catalyzed by the fact that I [work at a school] with the greatest number of African American students, students with special needs, and students who are socio-economically disadvantaged, and I have and will continue to loudly advocate for all of my students' needs," Complainant 1 stated referring to North, and later added. "I also believe President [Ismail]'s threat is rooted in the fact that North High School is led by three women and a black man."

In Exhibit 2 of the report, Ismail responded to all accusations made by both complainants.

"With regards to my 'dismissal' of diversity and equity work, I find this statement insulting, especially in that my family was one of the first Muslim families in GPPSS and my father built a mosque in our school system when I was growing up," Ismail wrote. "She has no idea what it is like being a member of a minority class."

Many of the witnesses interviewed agreed that diversity work can be improved in the district. Ismail was board president in 2023.

"'Equity' is a word that can't be spoken in Grosse Pointe," Witness 2 said and later wrote, " People are fearful that if you talk a lot about DEI [diversity, equity and inclusion], [there will be adverse consequences]. DEI work feels like it's not an option now [under the new, 2023, Board]."

In Ismail's interview with Sutton, he discussed how he views diversity work should be treated in the district. Dr. Suzanne Klein was the Superintendent of GPPSS from 1996-2011. In 2024, Grosse Pointe North's Library was named after Dr. Klein.

"There has been a big push ... things like DEI [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion], CRT [Critical Race Theory], educational acronyms, grading for equity ... There are a lot of social and political issues that have gotten involved that weren't here when Suzanne [Klein] was. She used to say, 'let's keep the main thing, the main thing.'"

Conclusion

In the conclusion of the report, Sutton addressed all apparent concerns throughout the eight interviews he conducted. He found while there was no evidence of gender bias and/or a harassment, there was evidence of retaliatory behavior against the complainants.

The board voted to not allow the board to view the report in April, 2024, but reversed their decision in December of 2024, weeks prior to the newly elected board taking their positions.

"I voted 'no' to release the report [to the public], and for just purely the reason that releasing it increases liability to the district where we are trustees over and I don't think there's gonna be anything in this report that surprises anyone," Trustee Sean Cotton said during the February 15, 2025 meeting.

With the contents of this report prompting the North's administrative team to resign, North's newly appointed principal, Dr. Sara Delgado, wants to keep focused on moving forward as a school.

"At Grosse Pointe North, we focus on supporting students' academic, social and emotional growth daily," Delgado wrote in an email to The Tower. "This has been our mantra throughout the entire school year, and it will continue to be moving forward."

Multiple school board members voiced that they believe that this is an opportunity for the district to grow, including Trustee Hull.

"I believe that it's important for us to move forward and to heal as a community, because it was not only affecting the people involved in this, but it was a ripple effect throughout the entire community," Hull said.

The report is public on the GPPSS school board's website.

"I was saddened by how much went on without anybody taking a step," Kranser said.