

## *Pastorek Partners, LLC*

### Memorandum

To: Greg Davis, Chair of T.M. Landry Board of Directors  
Linda Johnson, Member of T.M. Landry Board of Directors  
Copy: Rob Couhig, Jeff Pastorek, Claire Ponthier  
From: Paul Pastorek  
Date: April 11, 2019

I was asked by you as the new Board of Directors of T. M. Landry College Prep (“T. M. Landry” or “School”) to oversee an investigation into the allegations that have been reported in the New York Times regarding the School (“Investigation”).

#### **My Background**

As you both know, I am formerly a member and the President (for three years) of the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (1996-2004) and formerly the Louisiana State Superintendent of Education (2007-2011), both of which oversee Pre-K-12 Education in Louisiana. I have been a practicing attorney since 1979 and recently have been working in consulting in the Pre-K-12 field. I have no formal affiliation with the School. I had never met the Landrys before undertaking this endeavor. I am a friend and colleague of yours. I am performing my oversight role without any remuneration. As a consequence of my involvement, I have worked with you and the law firm of Couhig Partners, LLC (“Couhig Law Firm”) regarding the investigation.

#### **Summary of the Investigation**

Because time was of the essence with respect to students applying for admission into post-graduate colleges and universities, the initial phase was to verify the accuracy and integrity of the student’s representations in their applications to the universities of their choice. The initial phase was concluded in early February. We have now concluded our second and final phase of the investigation that delves into the other allegations of mistreatment and lack of educational rigor. There was a limitation on the investigation: a lawyer advised us that she represented the students and parents who were interviewed by the New York Times, and she refused to allow the investigators to interview her clients.

The firm also interviewed all of the teachers and administrative staff individually, without the presence of the Landry’s and under the promise of confidentiality. I took part in some of these interviews. The firm and I conducted separate interviews with the Landrys. I also interviewed the Board members and a few other members of the community.

Finally, I paid a surprise visit to the school early on in the Investigation on February 1<sup>st</sup> of 2019 to get a sense of the true educational climate. I viewed all classrooms and every student in attendance that day. I spoke with several teachers about their teaching approach, curriculum,

teaching standards and assessment evaluations. I also spoke to students about their work and what they liked and disliked about the school. I asked the Landrys about the school model, the issues raised by the New York Times articles, and many questions about their school. Based on my experience in doing walk throughs in public and private schools throughout many states in the United States, it was one of the better schools that I have seen. I was very impressed with the Landrys and how much they accomplish with very modest resources. Likewise, I was impressed with the teachers and the student work that I saw. The students were by and large very motivated and engaged. The students were self-directed and engaged where appropriate in peer to peer learning. I had a chance to interact with a classroom of 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders as they were studying stock trading using technical trading techniques. I also watched a class of other middle school students who were factoring polynomials, as well as another class of elementary students who were studying Latin. The students were generally highly engaged in their lessons taking more and more responsibility for their personal learning as they advanced to higher levels in the school.

I was impressed by the educational model used at T.M. Landry. It is an amalgam of many different models that I have seen in other quality schools. The most prominent elements were the project based learning and mastery elements. Project based learning calls on students to take on more responsibility for their learning as they progress. It calls on teachers to do less lecturing and spend more time one on one with the students to assist them in mastering their work. Among other things, I inquired of the Landrys at length on their school model and how it was implemented, the assignment of grades, the use of standardized tests for benchmarking purposes, various climate issues raised by the NYT articles, and student disciplining practices. My overall impression was that they know and understand what a good school does and they have methods and procedures to assure that it does so. That does not mean that everything is perfect – as no school is perfect. However, the passion and capabilities of the Landrys were outstanding.

### **Overall Conclusions and Recommendations**

There is real, quality teaching and learning taking place at T.M. Landry. The School's curriculum and pedagogy model appears to be quite progressive. As pointed out in the Couhig memorandum, TM Landry appears to be a genuine incubator for successfully teaching students, many of whom are left behind in a traditional school setting. No school can be everything to every student, TM Landry included. But the Landry students attending the school were and are learning not only the standard subject matter of the average school, but additionally are pressed to:

1. Engage in higher order thinking skills;
2. Study real life problems and the application of academic principals;
3. Have students grow not only their academic skills, but their personal skills in areas of self-confidence, capacity to engage peers and adults; and
4. Build students self-reliance and resilience.

Developing these skills will contribute to more students successfully matriculating to post-graduate studies and to being successful in these studies.

I agree with the conclusions of the Couhig law firm, that the experience described by current and former students interviewed was the School's leadership offered a sense of community, acceptance, and selflessness that was genuinely unique. They also described a staff and administration that instilled a strong sense of self-sufficiency, confidence, public-speaking skills, and other traits that would no doubt benefit any college student.

But the current students also indirectly described an overworked administration struggling to do its best to juggle the difficult demands put on itself, particularly when the student body grew substantially in recent years.

There do not appear to be intentional or systemic efforts to provide false information to colleges; however, the School should a better record keeping in order to demonstrate that they have properly dotted the "i's" and crossed the "t's". I would note that the staffing of the school is very lean and would benefit from additional administrative support. In most cases, the discrepancies identified by the Couhig law firm were not material and appear to simply be the result of sloppiness and probably not calculated to provide the students with any distinct advantage. And in many cases, there simply appears to be a normal and good faith effort to show students in the best light in a competitive college application field.

Allegations of physical abuse reported to the New York Times were difficult to analyze due to the lack of participation in the investigation from many individuals, including any of the individuals interviewed for the Article. However, based on the information available, the Article seems to give the impression that physical violence was prevalent at the School, while all of the individuals interviewed in the investigation described no physical abuse, limited corporal one spanking incident, and no humiliating punishment (kneeling) in the past that had been authorized by a parent or guardian. That said, kneeling and periodic yelling appears to have been a prevalent and normalized method of discipline or correction.

Other specific findings are as follows:

- Test prep for the ACT's is a common activity. Some schools place heavy emphasis on this idea. Landry is one of those schools. There are people who contest the wisdom of too much test prep and whether it results in better scores. This is an age old question. I do not believe this approach is per se inappropriate or wrong. Indeed, the students seemed to benefit from it.
- ACT exams which results are submitted in applications to universities and colleges are the result of exams that are taken at independently-proctored sites, usually a higher education institution.

Finally, there was an incident where a student threatened another student in early 2017. Mr. Landry intervened and there was a difference of opinion as to what Mr. Landry said. After that period, Mr. Landry installed cameras in the school in order to maintain a record of what occurred. That camera system has been continuously operated even since.

## **Recommendations**

1. The Board should adopt a clear written policy on school standards, including what types of punishment is permitted at the school. The Board should make the policy in writing and clear to parents and students.
2. The Board should require a process be adopted to independently verify the students applications submitted to colleges and universities are confirmed by parents and students. This verification should be documented and the documentation reviewed by the Board at the appropriate time.
3. Evaluate the administrative needs of the school and assure that they are properly addressed.

Sincerely,

Paul Pastorek  
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cc: Robert E. Couhig, Jr. (Couhig Partners LLC)