

## **PUSD, Republican Women of Prescott at odds over alliance with The Launch Pad Teen Center**

Leaders want to query board on instructional practices, outside events targeted to district students



Launch Pad Teen Center Executive Director Courtney Osterfelt speaks to the Prescott Unified School District Governing Board April 5, 2022. (Nanci Hutson/Courier)

By Nanci Hutson

The Republican Women of Prescott wants a chance to convince the Prescott Unified School District Governing Board to rethink its expanded affiliation with The Launch Pad Teen Center.

Part of the political organization's concern revolves around the Launch Pad's hosting an advertised "Q Prom" event in May, a prom/dance hosted at its newly expanded center attended by 30 area students who identify as other than heterosexual or who are questioning their gender identity.

In a June 7, 2022 letter to Governing Board President Deb Dillon, with a follow-up meeting between two executive leaders, Dillon and Superintendent

Joe Howard, the political organization's executive leadership asked that they be allowed to air their concerns about the affiliation between the district and The Launch Pad at the July 12 school board meeting. That request was not granted — only Governing Board Member Kara Woods requested the agreement be revisited.

At this time, Howard said he does not intend to recommend the organization be granted such an opportunity. School board agendas are drafted by the superintendent in consultation with the board president, with two or more board members also able to suggest agenda items.

Document

[RWOP letter mailed to Prescott Unified School District](#)

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In the letter, the RWOP leadership said it wanted to be able to speak to the board “to discuss our observation and present our questions; especially relating to teaching that falls outside of instructional academics; lesson plans that may sow bias on identity groups and privilege and the scope of LGBTQ advertising on bulletin boards allowed with the current MOU with The Launch Pad.”

The Launch Pad's existing MOU was expanded and renewed with the school board's unanimous approval at the April 5 board meeting. Launch Pad Founder and Executive Director Courtney Osterfelt was invited to talk about the ongoing partnership between the center and the schools. In the agreement, The Launch Pad's latest program, the Boys to Men Mentoring network, is included for mentoring in district schools; the center is stipulated to provide insurance, and accept liability, for any events hosted in school facilities and to conduct background checks for any academic mentors they assign to volunteer in the schools. In addition, The Launch Pad, which serves students between middle school and high school across Yavapai County, is able to announce events on the school bulletin board with permission from

school leaders. Permission slips must be provided by parents to participate in any Launch Pad programs.

The agreement is clear that the school has authority to assess the advertising of any events. Howard and Osterfelt confirmed the “Q Prom” was not advertised through school channels, only through the center’s social media and newsletter.

Given the ongoing concern of the RWOP and others in the community, Woods said she will likely try again to garner support from fellow board members to again review the agreement. Though she said she appreciates The Launch Pad for its academic and leadership programs, she thinks it is important the district steer clear of endorsement of certain events that may conflict with the values of some families and community members.

The RWOP letter outlines the organization’s diligence in addressing members’ concerns about the instructional direction of the district, including the extent critical race theory and social and emotional learning are impacting academic instruction. As part of the nonpartisan Governing Board race in November, the organization has hosted two forums for five of the seven candidates affiliated with the party to discuss those very topics.

The Daily Courier has provided no coverage to those events as this is a non-partisan race, and any forum coverage will be limited to those open to all local candidates.

“The Republican Women of Prescott (RWOP) represents the interests of 941 women and men in the quad-city area. Our organization’s focus promotes our veterans, our students through the school volunteer program and annual student scholarships,” the letter reads. “We jealously guard our children and grandchildren, as they are the future of America.”

To that goal, the letter states members have voiced concerns about the school district’s direction in relation to instructional practices and the district’s affiliation with the teen center. Through the organization’s research, the letter states, the organization has “significant questions” they want the school board to answer.

Asked for comment on the letter, and other concerns the organization might have about district programs and partnerships, RWOP President Sherrie Hanna on Tuesday deferred until the group's executive board meets on Aug. 2. After that meeting, Hanna said, the leadership will be able to make a statement.

Aware of the political tenor of the nation, state and local community at this time, Howard said he and Dillon met with Hanna and another leader to rectify misleading information about the agreement. He noted the district has had an ongoing MOU with The Launch Pad, and essentially, the agreement differentiates the roles of the two organizations and that their decisions are independent of one another. The alliances are strictly related to promoting programs they mutually agree benefit students, he said. Howard assured the "Q Prom" was not an event the district advertised through its school channels.

But Howard said the RWOP leadership did not seem to be swayed. At that time, he said, the leaders had yet to contact The Launch Pad about their concerns.

Indeed, Osterfelt said she was notified by others in the community about the concerns that were being talked about in various venues. So she invited RWOP organization leaders to The Launch Pad to talk about their concerns.

She said she explained the "Q Prom" was not a new event, but rather one the center has hosted for the past seven years. Osterfelt, too, said she shared national statistics related to substance abuse, homelessness rates and suicide trends for teens wrestling with identity issues without proper support. Osterfelt explained the center now serves 1,000 youth from the Quad Cities; 30 attended the prom.

Again, though, she said she did not garner a sense that the RWOP leaders appreciated that the center operates under a philosophy that it is an "inclusive" space for all teens, regardless of a teens' socio-economic background, academic standing or sexual orientation.

Concerned that there appears to be some community misinformation, Osterfelt said she tried to clarify the center's ongoing mission, one she

reiterates is all about promoting a positive culture in a safe space open to all students.

As for their relationship with the schools, Osterfelt said the primary connection with PUSD is related to offering academic mentorship, tutoring and activities to support students' academic success. In addition, with the center's newly opened space in downtown Prescott there are opportunities on a daily, weekly and monthly basis for students to explore various work apprenticeships, leadership opportunities and various art, music and outdoor adventure exploration. The Launch Pad shuttle is available to students who need a ride to the center from school.

"Our relationship with the school district is all about kids. It's really that simple," Osterfelt said.

For Howard, the RWOP's letter and certain commentary during some candidate forums is troubling, as it reaches beyond political differences. He said he is willing to clarify instructional practices, but cannot abide those who are willfully spreading misinformation about PUSD's mission: "Every Child, Every Day."

"We accept every child who comes into our district. We don't want to, and can't, turn any kids away. And we're proud of that," Howard said.

Aware there are many sensitive topics being debated in this community and elsewhere, Howard said he and his fellow district leaders have long been conscious to remain respectful of all opinions. In all of its partnerships with area agencies, and the volunteers who give generously of their time in the schools, the focus is on helping students achieve at their personal best.

"We're not choosing sides," he said.

Yet, he said he also will not stand for disrespectful behavior aimed at district educators' whose sole agenda is to nurture and instruct every child that walks through their door.

No district educator on his watch will be erroneously attacked as "groomers or pedophiles," Howard said of certain "vile" comments related to mental health,

counseling and other support advocacy for students labeled as “indoctrination.”

“These are people who have dedicated their lives for lower pay and harder work than in many other professions,” Howard said. “When that happens, the gloves are coming off.”