

## NEWS

# Investigation into Bremerton schools chief includes network use, culture, board says



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The Bremerton School District board on Thursday morning approved putting Superintendent James Crawford on administrative leave, citing an investigation into use of the district's computer network, questions about his answers regarding those concerns, and workplace culture in the district office.

The board also appointed Assistant Superintendent Garth Steedman as interim superintendent during a special session held in front of a large and vocal crowd on the Fourth of July holiday.

The audience of about 100 erupted in boos and shouts as the board took a series of three votes in succession, during a meeting that last a total of around three minutes. The five-member board, led by chair Aly Rotter, voted unanimously to place Crawford on administrative leave, appointed Steedman, and approved the release of a public statement.

That statement, which was emailed out and posted to the district's website soon after, called the decision difficult and acknowledged inaccurate rumors and speculation going through the community since it became public that an investigation is ongoing.

"We decided that administrative leave was necessary and appropriate in light of the preliminary results of an investigation into allegations regarding Dr. Crawford's use of the District's network and his candor when he was given opportunities to address such use, and also because of concerns we have received regarding the tenor of Dr. Crawford's interactions with District staff members," the statement read.

Board members Rotter, Carolynn Perkins, Karen Bolton and Jonee Dubois left the dais quickly after the meeting adjourned. Board vice-chair John Paul Hurley stayed behind as the crowd lingered in the district's meeting room in West Bremerton, and acknowledged that the quick action, including calling a meeting on a holiday, was due to information the board received verbally from legal counsel during an executive session on Wednesday morning, which was also called on just 24-hours notice, as is legally required.

"The concerns were such that we didn't feel time was on our side," Hurley said.

Hurley said the board anticipates receiving written preliminary information about the investigation in the coming weeks, but said there is no timeline for a complete report that will be available publicly.

Crawford sent the Kitsap Sun a statement on Thursday afternoon, indicating his intention to continue leading the district.

"I want to take this opportunity to thank the board, staff, community, and students for the incredible work we accomplished together throughout the year," Crawford wrote. "Despite the current situation, I remain optimistic about Bremerton's future, improving our systems at the central office and beyond, and achieving great things. The dedication and commitment of our community have been truly inspiring."

Members of the public in attendance responded loudly to the board's initial vote, which placed Crawford on leave. Crawford, who was in attendance and seated near the five board members, stood immediately after the first vote and walked to the rear of the room near supporters, then exited quickly before the meeting adjourned.

Shouts of "For what?" and "Recall the board" were heard as the meeting adjourned, and both Rotter and Bolton sternly reprimanded the crowd, at one point threatening to clear the room if order was not restored.

"Very discouraging meeting, very angry meeting, this is ridiculous," said Bette Hyde, a former Bremerton School District superintendent and supporter of Crawford, following the meeting. She criticized the lack of time for members of the public to address the board. "Look at these people. They're incensed."

Dr. Crawford, a 1998 graduate of Bremerton High School with degrees from both Washington State and the University of Washington, was hired by the board in March 2023, and began as superintendent on July 1, 2023. Last week the school board voted not

to extend Crawford's contract for a third year, and his current contract runs through June 30, 2026.

"I'm appalled," Barb Wright of Bremerton said after the meeting. "I've had some interactions with the superintendent and I have a lot of respect for him. ... We still have no idea (what happened). To have a meeting on the Fourth of July, and it's just 1-2-3. They railroaded this."

The board's statement did not indicate when further information may be released. It concluded: "This is a temporary step while we await the final results of the investigation and learn more about the workplace culture under Dr. Crawford's leadership. We will provide an additional update when we have more information we can share."