

The City of  
**SAN DIEGO**  
The People's Councilmember  
Monica Montgomery Steppe

For Immediate Release | June 4, 2021  
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**Reaction to Open Letter from Vice President of SDUSD**  
*AMID CONTINUED CALLS FOR TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY,  
SAN DIEGO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT GOES ON THE ATTACK*

SAN DIEGO, CA – Two weeks ago, Councilmember Monica Montgomery Steppe penned [an open letter on Lincoln High School](#) to San Diego Unified School District asking for answers to twelve specific questions from parents, advocates, and community activists.

Rather than answer these questions in a transparent and forthright manner, Board Vice President Dr. Sharon Whitehurst-Payne has launched a [one-woman smear campaign](#) against Councilmember Montgomery Steppe including personal attacks on her integrity and dignity in governance.

**Councilmember Montgomery Steppe issued the following reaction:**

**“It is becoming painfully obvious that San Diego Unified School District finds it difficult to be transparent and accountable to our community. It is disappointing that instead of getting answers to our questions, we have gotten only the wrath of SDUSD’s public relations machine in crisis response mode.**

**“Let this shine a light for other leaders in this region on the magnitude of the crisis our students are facing. This is only a glimpse of what our parents and students have experienced for years when trying to get straight answers from SDUSD leadership. The blatant disrespect, dismissiveness, and divisiveness are palpable and unacceptable when dealing with the people you claim to serve. Yes, the Lincoln High School community does deserve an apology for the many years SDUSD has behaved this way.**

**“Calls for transparency and accountability are not antagonistic. The community has a right to answers. As policymakers, we have a responsibility to be open, transparent, accountable, and accessible. No one is above answering to the people who put them into public office. Our business is public service. We are a people-powered office.**

**“After years of hearing community concerns, I simply elevated them. My voice joined a chorus of community voices demanding answers from SDUSD. We simply want answers. Anything other than straight answers is a red herring, and we will not be distracted by these tactics.**

**“From day one, I have carried and amplified the community’s voices. I am standing with the students, parents, activists, education justice advocates, and community leaders continuing to call for answers.**

**“Anyone who equates institutional accountability with not caring about the people the institution serves fundamentally misunderstands the role of public service. I look forward to having this conversation at the community forum, so that we may hear firsthand from our community and see where hand-picked statistics and political talking points differ from community experience. My office will not be distracted by rhetoric and red herrings. We will fight for the people and continue to amplify their voices.”**

**The community reacts to Dr. Sharon Whitehurst-Payne’s Open Letter:**

*“I appreciated Councilmember Montgomery Steppe’s open letter to San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD). For far too long, the district has ignored Lincoln High School. SDUSD leadership has become very proficient at self-promotion and self-congratulation, redirecting conversations around problematic issues by creating positive narratives that are either false or misleading, by highlighting small successes of an otherwise bleak truth. That was what Dr. Whitehurst-Payne did in her open letter. She side-stepped the questions about the long-term academic issues at Lincoln High by referencing the more recent implications of the pandemic and spinning a positive narrative. We must keep up the pressure. SDUSD has ignored the issues in the Lincoln Cluster for more than a decade, and without continued focus and pressure, district leaders will continue to look the other way.”* **A.S., educational justice activist**

*“I am sorely disappointed by Dr. Sharon Whitehurst-Payne’s vitriol-laced personal attack on the People’s Councilmember. It is shameful that while community members are working earnestly to organize a community forum in an attempt to get answers to our questions, our representative on the school board is signing her name to downright disrespectful and condescending letters instead of answering the calls for transparency. And despite us having secured commitments from other members of the school board and key administrators to participate in our community forum, Dr. Whitehurst-Payne has still not returned our call. This is but one example of how our community is consistently denied access to discuss our grievances and concerns with our representative, the Vice President. If anyone owes an apology, it's Sharon.”* – **G. Jones-Wright, Executive Director, Community Advocates for Just and Moral Governance & long-time volunteer mock trial coach at Lincoln High School**

*“To think that the Board President and longest serving member of the second largest school district in our Great State, would sign off on such an utterly disrespectful letter, is beyond*

shameful. We won't back down. We want answers.” –**P. Liburd, Lincoln High School community advocate**

“Last month, Councilmember Montgomery Steppe took unprecedented action to publicly call attention to how SDUSD is failing Lincoln High School. Rather than take the opportunity to work together to address the concerns of the community, School Board Member Dr. Sharon Whitehurst-Payne chose to respond with false analogies and baseless innuendos. SDUSD’s response was not only an insult and attack on the Councilmember, it was insulting and disrespectful to all of District 4. The irony that the letter came from Dr. Whitehurst-Payne, who just two years ago blamed the district's continued failure of Black students on their parents, is telling. Rather than take responsibility, she and the school district continue to blame anyone other than themselves. We will not allow them to blame students, teachers, or community members for their failure to provide a quality education for all San Diegans. That is what they were elected to do and that is where they are failing. The only people surprised by the concerns voiced by Councilmember’s open letter were the school board members who have been ignoring those same concerns for years. The time for playing political games – with our children’s lives without public conversation or accountability – is over. We appreciate Councilmember Montgomery Steppe for her willingness to advocate for the community she was sworn to represent and the students who attend our schools. I wish Dr. Whitehurst-Payne would take this time to learn from her example. We need advocates for our students, not unapologetic mouthpieces for the district.” – **K. Alexander, President and Founder, Pillars of the Community**

“As an elected body, it is the San Diego Unified District Board of Education’s duty to respond with respect, transparency and well-founded answers to questions raised by their constituents. Acting on behalf of her constituents, Councilmember Monica Montgomery Steppe posed legitimate questions to the District regarding community concerns about Lincoln High School. It was disappointing to see the District respond by engaging in a series of insulting and condescending attacks. Instead, the Board should work with other elected officials to seek solutions to well-documented issues facing Lincoln High School. Students, parents and community stakeholders in the District deserve nothing less.” **N. Chávez-Peterson, Executive Director, ACLU of San Diego & Imperial Counties**

[Councilmember Monica Montgomery Steppe](#) is an attorney and represents the [Fourth Council District](#) on the San Diego City Council, which includes the following communities: Alta Vista, Broadway Heights, Chollas View, Emerald Hills, Encanto, Greater Skyline Hills, Jamacha, Lincoln Park & Knox, Lomita Village, North Bay Park Terraces, Oak Park, O’Farrell, Paradise Hills, Redwood Village, Rolando Park, South Bay Terraces, Valencia Park and Webster. She is the Chair of the [Committee on Public Safety and Livable Neighborhoods](#).

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