

1. If an administrative employee was insubordinate, adversarial, and disrespectful, how would you respond?

In our conversation on March 10, I talked about the need to provide accountability and discipline for employees. In my opinion that can only be done effectively after two other conditions have been established:

First, employees need to believe leaders care about them. Whether their performance is exemplary or poor, almost nobody comes to work planning to do a lousy job. Even adversarial, insubordinate and disrespectful conduct usually reflects some deep personal fear or frustration. In other answers, I describe a 90-day entry period that will have to consist of a lot of listening. In a crisis environment, everyone will have a story to tell and will want to be heard. The first condition for establishing discipline and accountability is listening, showing empathy, and building an understanding that leadership actually cares about the people involved in the system.

Second, all humans crave structure and clarity. Confusion is the enemy of progress. Leadership must establish professional competence, which creates a common belief that there is order, we know what we are doing, and we are equipped with the knowledge and experience to face any challenges. My job is to exhibit these traits in all my interactions with employees and other stakeholders. I also rely on a deep knowledge base of guidance documents that I have created in other school districts. These can be modified to meet Claremont's needs. These resources should help employees quickly begin to understand that we possess real expertise in the central office and are not just making things up as we go along.

Once we have those two conditions: I care about you as a person and also have the expertise to help solve problems, I believe it becomes far easier to instill accountability. I expect employees to develop expertise because I expect myself to have expertise. I acknowledge that change can be hard because I've made changes and it has been hard. The non-negotiables are that as long as we all continue to accept paychecks we are committed to pursuing the district's goals. I have high expectations by try to temper those with a big safety net of understanding and encouragement.

2. How can you bring and enforce discipline and academic rigor in the school system?

Academic rigor is a byproduct of the curriculum, instruction and assessment program I describe elsewhere in this document. One of my most important tasks will be to identify the district administrator who is equipped to lead this work. I don't plan to do it myself; it should be a function of an administrator who can be totally devoted to student achievement and teacher support. My job is to find the right person, guide their work, and ensure it doesn't hit roadblocks.

Discipline is a slightly different matter... only slightly, because students who are engaged in rigorous, meaningful academics have far fewer behavior problems. Nevertheless, principals will need leadership and support regarding student discipline. I

believe in clarity and high expectations... human beings thrive with structure. Students do not benefit from a permissive environment. I have some important expectations about progressive discipline and due process, which are rooted in state and federal discipline laws that changed about a decade ago. Without getting into too much detail, principals have the authority to suspend students for limited durations and specific reasons; after a certain number of days' suspension, I require principals to notify me, and I hold a hearing with the student and a parent or guardian. I have some other requirements involving suspension of students who have IEPs. These are all matters I review with building administrators annually in August, prior to the start of the year.

### 3. What order-of-magnitude increase in standardized test scores can you commit to, and in what time frame?

I will not commit to any particular quantity of improvement over any timeframe shorter than five years. If I did I would be lying to you, which I will not do.

Also, I am not your curriculum person, and you don't need me to be your curriculum person. If a school district has 200 employees, probably a lot more than 100 of them have teaching and administrative certifications with training in curriculum, instruction and assessment. However, you're lucky if three employees understand municipal and school finance. You need your chief executive to be an expert on school finance and to know enough about curriculum to make sure the right people are doing the right work. I favor having a district-level Director or Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, and I supervise that person, who is then responsible for working with principals and all other staff on these important initiatives.

Improving curriculum and instruction is one of the most frustrating projects in a public school district. It takes years, and the reason it takes years is that in order to do it right you have to build a culture that uses data to inform instructional decisions.

Having said all that, there are two answers to the curriculum question, and both are equally important.

The first answer is about how we change curriculum and instruction, for it is impossible to improve student learning without starting here:

**Part one** of this project is data. The K-12 program needs to have regular, consistent data collection that shows where students are and how much progress they are making. STAR assessments by Renaissance Learning are one example of a pretty handy way to build longitudinal models of student learning over time. When we see areas in which students are deficient or struggling, we can re-tool instruction to fill those gaps. Without consistent data collection practices this isn't possible.

**Part two** is ensuring that teachers are using curriculum and lessons that align to the state standards that are going to be tested. You may have heard of "I can" statements or of "Scope and Sequence" documents. These are ways of organizing instruction from September through June to ensure all the standards are being addressed in each class or grade level. Even though all teachers have a professional responsibility to maintain curriculum and to plan lessons, a

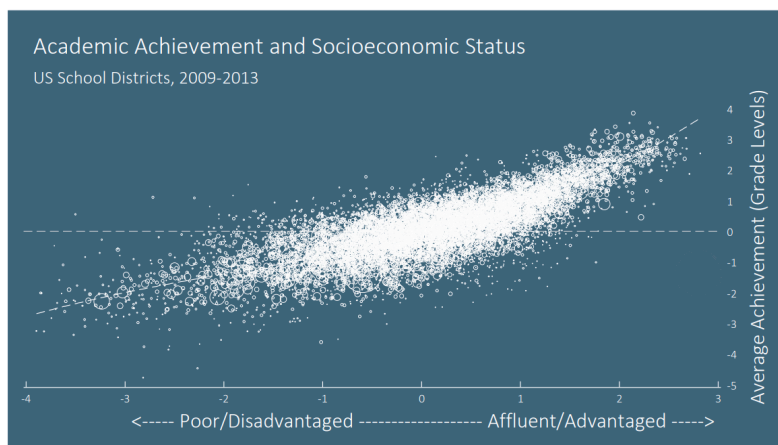
school district has to provide oversight. There are two reasons for this: First, we have to supervise employees to ensure they are meeting their professional responsibilities. Otherwise, we endorse conformance. Second, there should be little to no variation in the student experience from room to room or from school to school. Let's say the district has four 3rd grade classrooms... a student in any one of those classes should receive a substantially similar educational experience. The student experience should not depend on which teacher a child has or in which school he or she is enrolled. The district should be ensuring that grade-level or content-area teams are working together to align their plans, instruction.

**Part three** is assessment. Even though standards-based assessment has been required under New Hampshire law since 2005, and all districts were supposed to have implemented competency-based assessment systems by 2009, it is not unusual to find districts where those requirements have been misunderstood or even ignored. So, I would need to learn what assessment practices are in place and whether they conform with state law. It can take two years to work with a faculty on changing assessment practices.

**Part four** is test scores. Students in grades 3-8 take ELA and Math tests, and students in grades 5, 8, and 11 take Science tests. 11th grade students take the SAT English and Math. When NHEd sends back data reports, we see breakdowns of achievement by subgroup (such as disabled students), and we get growth data as well that tracks how much students are progressing each year.

We have been doing this work in Barnstead for about four years. In 2020, the school's students were in the bottom 5% in New Hampshire in average test scores. Since then, with all the work I've just described taking place, scores have begun to creep up. Last year, the school's average student growth broke above the state average. The average Barnstead Elementary student showed higher-than average growth from September through June than the average student in the state.

The second part of the test score question has to do with understanding expectations. We have immense amounts of data correlating student achievement to a range of factors. Stanford researcher Sean Reardon has shown that a school district's average social-economic status is a stronger predictor of student achievement than any other factor (including race).



(Reardon, 2016)

<https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/reardon%20district%20ses%20and%20achievement%20discussion%20draft%20april2016.pdf>

This is true across the United States -- students from wealthier school districts generally perform, on average, two to three grade levels above expectations. Students from poorer districts see average achievement levels well below expectations.

*This data is not an excuse to simply accept lower test scores in a poorer community. On the contrary, it provides important context so a less-affluent school district can understand and celebrate improvements over expectations. Claremont can show significant growth and progress without necessarily equaling or overtaking students in a district like Hanover, for example, where students have advantages that Claremont may not be able to easily replicate. It would be important to determine what *expected* student achievement looks like so we can more-effectively evaluate results and track improvements.*

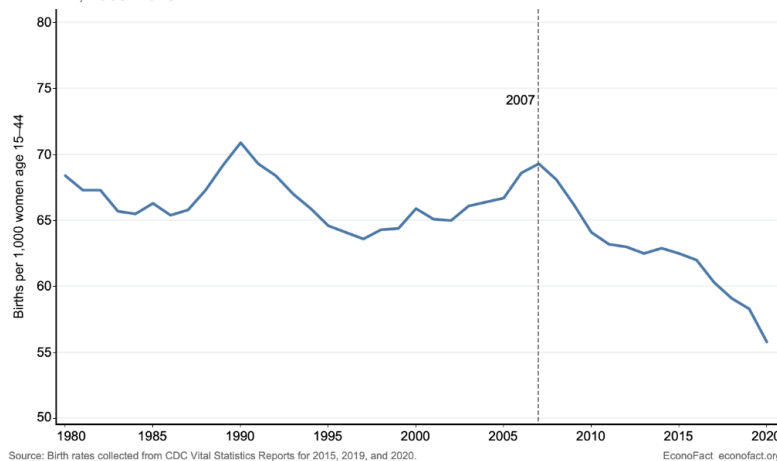
In the end, a smart district's goal is to become an outlier by beating expectations. Claremont may not surpass Hanover in achievement, but if Claremont could even get close to Hanover's test scores, it would represent a huge win after a lot of hard work.

4. "Our school district, like many in our area, has been experiencing a steady decline in student enrollment over the last decade. What strategies would you implement and measures take to address the short-term impacts and the long-term programmatic and financial sustainability of our schools?"

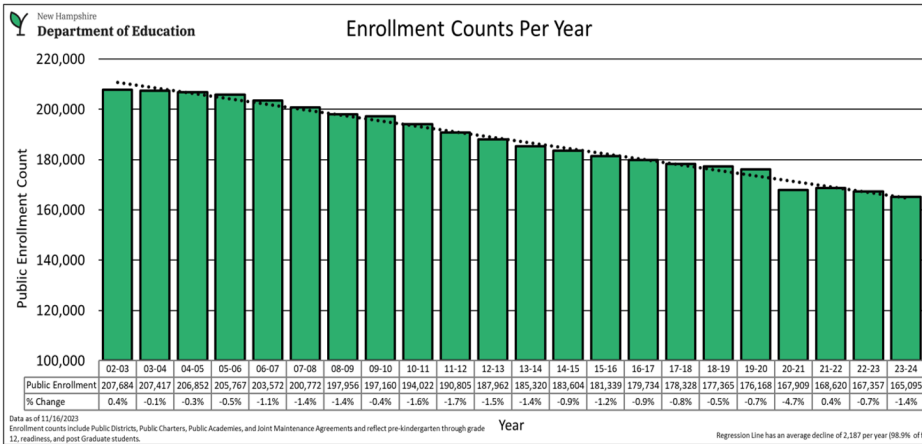
The United States has been experiencing this decline, and it is first and foremost the result of a decline in birth rate:

**TREND IN US BIRTH RATES**

YEARLY, 1980-2020



In New Hampshire, there were about 208,000 public school students in 2004 and about 165,000 in 2024. That is more than a 20% decline in two decades:



Prior to your recent financial crisis, it is unlikely you've been cutting costs to keep pace with the reduction in students. A comprehensive analysis of the Claremont schools' capacity, enrollment, and staffing levels is essential and must be a top priority.

Long-term planning requires stakeholder involvement, starting with the school board. New Hampshire is entering a new era of student mobility. It would be wise to explore the community's values and interest in creating programs that might attract students to stay enrolled in the schools but also possibly to come to Claremont from other communities. Vocational and technical programs, for one example, may provide an opportunity to demonstrate value and attract enrollment.

*This topic has to be an important part of Claremont's recovery plan. We should take enough time to collect good, accurate data so the board's strategic direction can be set for the next 5-10 years. We want to minimize the risk that the district might choose one set of goals this year and then change them before there is time to see results.*

**5. In your first 90 days, how would you distinguish between symptoms of distress and the actual root cause of the district's global poor performance?**

In the first 90 days everyone will want to tell me their stories, recount their experiences, wounds, and perceived mistreatment. This is normal, and it is important that I listen and empathize. If your leader doesn't care about the people, then his or her work on the system will fail. All the personal stories, opinions, grudges and ideas have to be superimposed over a realistic picture of the district's current situation. That picture must be based on cold, hard facts.

So, for the 90-day entry period, I have to be doing two things: 1) spending a lot of time listening to people, and 2) looking at a lot of data to try to paint an accurate picture of the status quo.

Once we have these two things: an understanding of the people and an understanding of the facts, we can start to develop strategy.

6. When a district is struggling, there is often tension between maintaining traditional structures and the need for radical reorganization. How do you evaluate when a school's physical or organizational structure, such as grade-span configuration or facility usage, is no longer serving the students?

The bad news is that Claremont is in a financial crisis, but the good news is that Claremont is in a financial crisis. I once took over a school that had recently been awarded a state-level "blue ribbon school" commendation.

That was, for my purposes, the worst thing that could have happened to them. I clearly saw that student achievement was far below the level where it ought to be, but faculty, staff, parents, and school board members were basking in the glow of this award and were convinced that they had a "great school."

Over time, as I continued to kindly but firmly present the data, they came around to the need for some changes, but it took a long time.

Claremont does not have that problem. I live on the opposite side of the state, yet I have been aware all year that Claremont is in crisis. It isn't a secret. This is an ideal situation for making change. It is important to recognize that traditional structures were once effective and may have produced great results at one time. However, circumstances today must be acknowledged and met head on.

It is critical that this be done with kindness, but that doesn't mean we equivocate. The work needs to be done. Involve stakeholders. Hear what they have to say. But, when it is decision-making time, thank them sincerely and rely on facts to make the decisions.

7. You may need to quickly make significant budget cuts, reallocate resources, or make infrastructure utilization changes. These actions will be met with heavy internal and public resistance. How will you determine that these changes are essential?

Legal and regulatory compliance come first. There are some annual needs that have to be met: emergency operations plans, Title IX and McKinney-Vento compliance, basic special ed compliance processes, and other systems and data for which the district is accountable are non-negotiable.

I maintain an [annual calendar](#) to help organize these necessary compliance items. Everything on these lists is required by regulation, law, a collective bargaining agreement, or some board policy. The example linked above is for my current school system and is a work in progress (I am working with NHed employees to add to this), but it could be easily adapted for Claremont. This would be a summer project for me.

It is pretty easy to explain to staff and administrators why they need to complete these tasks once we connect them to regulation, policy, or law.

Also, doing all this work and doing it on time ultimately provides staff with a more pleasant, less stressful day-to-day work life. And, it reinforces that there is stability,

someone is in charge and possesses some expertise, and that this structure protects everyone from uncertainty and failure.

I like to tell boards, “you pay me to take the bullets.” As elected officials, you don’t get paid enough (ha!) to take the criticism. That is my job. All I ask is that you don’t disagree with me or attack me publicly. Come talk to me anytime, take the votes you need to take, and I will execute your directions. But when staff or the public don’t like something, I never say “the board made me.” That’s out of line. You pay me to take the heat.

We follow the law, regulation, and policies. We honor collective bargaining agreements and legally-adopted contracts. Against that backdrop, I can stare down any resistance.

**8. How will you evaluate if our physical or organizational structure, such as grade-span configuration or facility usage, is not optimal and affects a change?**

This has to start with enrollment. Schools have to be built to accommodate the kids in the community. I conduct regular population projections and would use those to start a review of building uses.

It’s also relevant to consider outcomes. Most guidance programs include some kind of interest assessment. At Prospect Mountain we found that about 20% of students were planning to pursue a post-graduate program or career related to healthcare. That is important knowledge when deciding on resource allocation, program development, and strategic partnerships.

This is closely related to enrollment and has to be a very important part of the district’s long-term recovery plan.

**9. How will you handle a situation where a key member of your leadership team is underperforming or resistant to a necessary fiscal or policy turnaround?**

I don’t believe I’ve ever been unkind to anyone, but I am also not afraid to deliver news people don’t want to hear. There is a very important difference.

I have negotiated some resignations and helped some folks decide to retire, but so far in my career I haven’t had to convene a termination hearing with a school board. I know how to place an employee on leave, when to investigate, and how to invest in progressive discipline. I’ve had employees who can’t meet expectations resign, then shake my hand and thank me for being fair. That is the ideal outcome if people can’t or won’t come along.

Certification (where required) and qualifications are not negotiable. I sense Claremont may have a problem with non-certified staff in some key positions. The good news is

that it's generally pretty straightforward to dismiss an employee who is not properly-certified. The bad news is that you have to employ someone, and recruiting can be tough.

As I mentioned March 10, I believe districts are better off when they pay well and focus on right-sizing their staff. I'd rather have fewer employees who feel respected and fairly compensated than a larger group who may believe they are doing you a favor by showing up every day. I think you end up spending less and getting more when you give better pay to the smaller group.

### 10. How will you balance retaining staff that have institutional knowledge v. creating a new team?

Anyone who wants to work hard and participate in the necessary changes should be welcomed with open arms. Anyone unwilling to meet those two conditions should be encouraged in a kind and friendly manner to seek employment elsewhere.

I am exceedingly patient with people who want to learn. I can be impatient with people who appear to believe they know everything. To me, the proof is in the pudding -- if we aren't getting results, maybe we aren't experts after all.

I think I am pretty self-aware. I know I don't share a lot of authority. I delegate a lot of responsibility, but in a system under my leadership it is safe to say everyone knows who is in charge. I know that I don't know everything, but I also understand that I sometimes come off as if I think I do. I try to be as authentic and human as possible in personal interactions so people can see the regular person behind the authority figure.

### 11. Describe your thinking with respect to:

#### a. Financial accountability: safeguarding resources, identifying inefficiencies, and implementing cost-saving Measures.

- Conservative budgeting
- Right-size the staff and pay them well (can actually save money while making the district a destination for staff)
- Purchasing rules
- Financial management policies
- Monthly expenditure reports as part of the public meeting

#### b. Team building and program evaluation: strengthening collaboration with leaders, the board, and staff, and evaluating academic, SPED, and SEL Programs.

- I am a "union guy" from my teaching days, was a local association rep... in NH, have had good relationships with NEA-NH, but I hold their feet to the fire.

- SPED is critical Compliance is not optional. My team has developed a “live binder” for staff to use, and we can (will need to) hold training.
  - Medicaid claims are a dangerous area; IDEA grants are critical; Special Ed admin needs to be expert and transparent. I know enough to hold that person accountable.
- Strong relationships in divisions across NHEd... I can talk to division directors and to the commissioner and associate commissioner when needed.
- Credibility with the state board of education. Through my other work in the state I have developed a reputation as someone they can trust.

**c. Rebuilding community trust: engaging parents and the broader community to increase the likelihood that necessary changes will be supported, creating a culture of community and collaboration**

- The community needs more than an expert leader who knows business and education; they need a cheerleader. I like to go to athletic events, Rotary and other community meetings, other community events like farmers’ markets, etc.
- I would expect to meet not just with members of the school board but with the mayor, members of the city council, business leaders, the school athletic boosters, PTA or PTO, special ed parent group (if one exists), and others.
- Everyone, and I mean everyone, will want to be heard.  
I am pretty confident of that.

**12. If selected, what duration would you like to see yourself having?**

I can work with the board and community to write a “recovery plan” in one year (probably more like six to nine months). I think you would need me for a second year to build and mentor the team that will implement that plan and guide the district into the future. If it is going well at that point you may wish to have me mentor those leaders for a period of time on a very part-time, consulting basis. But, first year first, it is going to take a lot of work to develop a solid recovery plan that the board and community can support.

We had a conversation about being “at will” versus having a guaranteed contract. I don’t need big guarantees. I will earn your trust. If I don’t have the board’s trust, I don’t want to be there, anyway. I don’t expect we would have a problem arriving at terms. I will not be inexpensive, but that’s more commensurate with my experience and abilities than anything else. I don’t want to take advantage of Claremont, but I am also considering a major change in my life for a couple of years to make this happen. If we succeed, it will feel like a bargain.

I live in Eliot, Maine with my wife of 30 years and do not plan to move. I would need to negotiate some expenses along with salary so I could have a place to stay in Claremont. If I didn't think we could work it out, and if my wife were not on board with this commitment, I would not have contacted you.

13. There was a budget deficit of up to \$5M (possibly double that). Legally required yearly financial audits have not been timely submitted in decades. There is a total dearth of policies, procedures, and guidelines to structure responsibilities and ensure accountability. What would be your strategy for correcting this situation, and how long will it take you to make all necessary changes?

A school district absolutely must have at least two out of the following three things: a competent special ed director, a competent business administrator, and a competent chief executive. With all three you can face any difficulty. With two of those three you can get by and stay out of trouble. With only one you will live in a constant state of frustration, and with none you will descend into chaos and crisis.

When my team took over the Barnstead school district, the board had just learned of their own financial crisis. A bookkeeper on the SAU staff had been embezzling money that ended up totaling six figures, the district's annual audit was being conducted by an unqualified individual who allowed the business administrator to control his reporting, and that business administrator lacked credentials or qualifications.

We facilitated a forensic audit, then worked with the FBI throughout their investigation and the subsequent criminal trial. I gave victim testimony on behalf of the school district to ensure the former bookkeeper had to serve prison time after she pleaded guilty.

My team worked with Primex to recover the district's losses, and I managed all public communication throughout the fall and at the next annual district meeting so the public would understand that the district had been made whole.

While all this was happening, we wrote and recommended that the board adopt about ten new fiscal control policies, some required for federal grant compliance and others to institute best practices. I composed a [Guide to Purchasing](#) for staff that we have continued to update and still use today in all our schools. We conducted exhaustive professional development training to teach all staff a) who is allowed to make purchases, b) how to make purchases, and c) when to ask for help with procurement. I am acquainted with Matt Angell and already shared this procurement guide with him. Hopefully the training process has already begun.

This kind of change requires a lot of repetition and annual updates. At our start-of-year training, all employees are required to read the procurement guide and sign off that they

have read and understood the material. I reserve the right to take disciplinary action against employees who violate my directives and/or board policies related to procurement. Though that may sound negative, please remember that “disciplinary action” just about always starts with friendly conversations, then progresses to a meeting, then something in writing, and only after a lot of prior discussion are we looking at things like letters in employees’ files or termination. What we are trying to achieve is change, not punishment.

While the financial crisis may be Claremont’s biggest problem right now, in my opinion it’s actually not the hardest thing to fix. This requires clarity and consistency, but it isn’t particularly difficult.

For the future, there should be a five-year, annually-updated capital plan along with an operating budget proposal. I am involved in those processes, as I will ultimately be accountable for performance against the bottom line. Too many districts ignore capital planning until they realize too late that buildings are in disrepair and deferred maintenance needs have ballooned.

**14. There is an acceptance of low standards and low expectations. What can you do as an Exec. Director to change this? Who or what will your influence be directed at?**

I expect everyone to show up and to do their jobs, and I model that. I like being seen at athletic events, at community meetings, or attending other functions related to the school and municipality. I am a cheerleader for learning in the community. Part of my goal is to show administrators what I expect them to be doing.

During the work day, I believe in spending a lot of time talking to people. I tell new and aspiring administrators all the time: desk work will wait until the afternoon, evening, or weekend. People are only available during the day, so spend that time with them. This is when we build relationships.

Respond to emails and messages, even if the response is “I need time before I can answer this” or “let’s get together to discuss it.”

From administrators and other staff, I expect accountability. I tend to put a lot in writing. Every management meeting includes notes that are shared with everyone who attends. We color code those notes: green for “discussion” items that we have not yet made decisions about, yellow for “decisions” that will inform future actions, and red for “action items” that I assign to particular administrators. When we meet the next time, we start by reviewing the previous meeting’s notes and checking on all follow-up items.

Employees learn quickly that if I take the time to put a message in writing, that means I think it is important, and I will not forget what I've asked them to do.

I publish [rules](#). I believe in these rules, but they also serve the strategic purpose of building a common set of understandings within the administrative teams.

I put guidance in writing to the greatest extent possible, and when administrators or others reach out with questions, I point them back to written guidance that can help them. I believe this creates the perception that we exist and work within a safe, organized space, where uncertainty is minimized. An old management consultant told me that the leader is responsible to “reduce confusion and create clarity.” By providing written resources, I help employees understand that we are organized and have access to the technical knowledge needed to meet challenges.

I also communicate with school boards in writing. I compose [memos](#) on matters to come before the board. These serve a few important purposes:

- They are entered into meeting minutes exactly as I wrote them, with no paraphrasing or interpretations;
- They allow board members to formulate questions in advance of meetings or to call me with any other input or concerns individuals may have;
- They allow meetings to move faster by letting board members pick the items they want to spend time discussing;
- These memos provide transparency to the public and reinforce that we are organized and professional.

**15. We are still being surprised by invoices of an order of magnitude of \$0.5M. How will you ferret out these lingering surprise problems?**

One of our consistent best practices in financial management is that all vendors are notified in writing during May and June that the fiscal year ends June 30, and all invoices against open purchase orders must be received by June 30 (or other arrangements made) or they can not be paid.

In Claremont's case, this probably hasn't been done. Nevertheless, you are required by law to close out each fiscal year and have the books audited. I would be skeptical of any new invoices arriving today for services or products delivered in any previous year. Those would have to come to me.

If you haven't done it yet, an organized procurement system must be implemented. My [Guide to Purchasing](#) should meet the needs of any school district. I would look to implement that immediately, which may include recommending some new or revised policies to the school board. One of its most important lessons is that a purchase order represents *permission to buy*. Without a purchase order, no employee has permission to expend district funds.

I also require that I personally sign all contracts for special ed services; I do not allow special ed administrators or their staff to enter into financial agreements on behalf of the district. This way, I can be sure a PO has been initiated and the business office has entered an encumbrance before I sign a contract.

I also do not allow McKinney-Vento coordinators to arrange cost-share agreements without first justifying the expenses to me. I sign those contracts also (usually transportation agreements), for the same reasons I sign the special ed contracts.