

## Statement by Doris Alvarez Regarding The Preuss School Audit

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In December of 2007, in response to allegations of cheating and grade tampering, the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) released the results of an internal audit of The Preuss School UCSD. As I was given no opportunity to include any comments in the audit report itself, nor have I yet been allowed to include my comments along with the audit on the UCSD website, I feel it is necessary to provide a record of my position regarding the audit.

It was my distinct pleasure to serve as the founding Principal of The Preuss School, and to guide it through its first nine years. I am proud of the fact that my leadership brought wide acclaim to both the school and the University. The Preuss School is a grand experiment that worked! At Preuss, we created a climate of professional development for teachers to grow and teach in ways that would help urban youngsters to achieve. As a result, the school was recognized repeatedly for its success, both locally and nationally.

For those reasons, and many others, The Preuss School, prior to the release of this audit, enjoyed an excellent reputation. It was regarded nationally as a demonstration of the potential for education reform. We enforced rigorous standards and provided a high-quality education to students from under-served communities. In so doing, we proved that our students could excel, given the right support. Unfortunately, the audit has now created the false perception that this success was fictitious and simply the result of widespread cheating and grade tampering. This has fed into long-standing prejudices about the ability of under-served minority students to succeed on their own. It would be tragic if such views were to be accepted as legitimate.

I feel it is important to point out that, in April of 2007, through existing governing processes, I did learn that the grades of two students at the school had been changed, to their advantage, without authorization. Incredibly, the students were the children of the school's registrar, who was responsible for entering grades. After an investigation, I immediately terminated the employment of the registrar at The Preuss School. Not long after that the University initiated its audit.

In the time since its release, both the methodology and the results of the audit have been called into question by numerous interested parties from outside and from within the organization. It is difficult to understand how the University can support an audit that contains so many statistical flaws and distortions of reality. For example, the auditors used invalid statistical methods to report their results. A random sample was collected but uncontaminated results on this sample were never reported. Instead, data from the random sample was mixed with data from the non-random sample, thus creating a false perception of widespread grade tampering.

Compounding this flawed methodology, the auditors made numerous arbitrary, incorrect claims about which grades were errors, which again implied widespread grade tampering.

For example, they concluded that such things as course retakes and course replacement decisions were errors. In so doing, they showed a clear lack of understanding of some of the most basic K-12 standard practices and course terminology. Additionally, as CPAs not trained in education, they also did not understand basic differences in course requirements and policies between the UC and California State University (CSU) systems. This one oversight alone accounted for almost 100 of the so-called errors in the audit. The presentation of findings was an absolute misrepresentation of the situation.

Another example of the auditor's misunderstanding of The Preuss School mission is the recommendation that we reevaluate all students taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses because some teachers interviewed complained that students weren't ready. The recent ranking of The Preuss School by Newsweek magazine as the 6<sup>th</sup> best school in the nation has everything to do with the number of AP courses that are taken and passed by the students. In fact, the auditors' total lack of understanding on this topic led to their conclusion that almost 70 grades should not have been given AP credit, and should therefore be classified as errors. This serves as a classic example of the auditor's failure to understand the importance of exposing all students to a rigorous curriculum, a tenet on which the school is based. Incredibly, the auditors made a presumption that they could, or worse, should, take credit away from a group of students who took a make-up course in good faith.

The audit provided a false impression that the extent of the issue of grades being incorrectly recorded was significant, when in fact it represented a small percentage of the total number of so-called errors found in the transcripts reviewed. Had they instead reported their findings in terms of the percentage of the total number of grades contained in those transcripts, the discrepancy rate is actually less than 2%. Additionally, when one takes into account the above-mentioned arbitrary and incorrect decisions about which grades were errors, the discrepancy rate is further cut in half.

Error discrepancy rates can never be condoned, even when they are inadvertent. To that end, the policy for effecting grade changes was placed in the staff handbook at the beginning of the 2007-08 school year. This significant policy change was never recognized in the audit.

In addition to not including any of my comments in the report, the University compounded the situation by actually releasing the audit to the media without even first giving The Preuss School Board of Directors an opportunity to review, make comments and ask questions. It had always been my understanding that governance issues were extremely important to the University, as they should be in any organization. If that is indeed the case, it is surprising to me that the Preuss Board, which has been delegated responsibility for oversight of the school, was not even allowed the courtesy of reviewing such an important document before it was given to the media and in turn, the public.

Just as the audit was released to the media before first allowing the Board of Directors to review it, I did not see the report until the day before it was released to the public. According to Eleanor Yang, of the San Diego Union Tribune, the media had the report

days before. In other words, the media knew before I did that disciplinary action would be taken against me. By any measure, this violates the basic principle of due process.

Frankly, this exposes the University to a subject that should be of great concern to all who care about quality education--that of the UC environment relative to Preuss and the issues of fairness and due process. Over the past several years, the UC system in general, and UCSD in particular, has been the recipient of intense criticism on a number of fronts. The manner in which the audit was handled raises a number of questions that emanate from this environment that exists in the university today. It seems that a rush to appear decisive and in control was more important than respecting the rights of individuals or the integrity and mission of the school. The lack of scrutiny is disturbing. There was no vetting, no truly legitimate investigation, no system of checks and balances.

In a sea of indecisiveness and bad publicity, the Preuss audit afforded the University an opportunity to make it appear that someone had taken charge.

After much reflection, I now realize that the pressure for me to resign as principal was not really meant to "help the school," as I was told, but to legitimize a poorly-conducted audit. Given time to fully review it, one would understand that the audit violated the most basic ethical standards of integrity, objectivity and competence and that its conclusions are without merit. The auditors should have concluded that there was no credible evidence of a willful intent to deceive, that actions had already been taken to address specific, isolated issues identified internally and that additional procedural improvements were being implemented to prevent further problems in the future. Unfortunately, and unfairly, the audit gives no credit for work already undertaken to address these issues and they used questionable methods and criteria to elicit and justify testimony.

It concerns me greatly that an audit such as this is given legitimacy without any questioning. Who audits the auditors? In the wake of the negative publicity, and with the heretofore excellent reputation of The Preuss School on the line, I believe it is vitally important that this audit be submitted to an impartial third party review such as the Bureau of State Audits or the Institute of Internal Auditors. I suggest this because I believe so strongly that the ethics of competency, objectivity, integrity and performance standards have been violated.

The Preuss School was, and remains today, a model school. A model emulated by educators across the nation. Indeed, I accepted the job as founding principal because I wanted to work in an environment of creating just such an opportunity for disadvantaged students to be prepared to go to college. As a low-income, minority youngster growing up in New Mexico, I knew firsthand the barriers to achieving that preparation. From my 30 years as an educator, I knew that if students were given the right courses, the right support and trained and enthusiastic teachers, these traditionally under-served students *could* achieve and go on to college.

The Preuss School was achieving and succeeding beyond anyone's expectations and the mission of the school was never compromised at any time. There was no cheating. Was there human error? Yes. Was there tampering? The only tampering was perpetrated by an employee who admitted to changing her children's grades and was subsequently fired. Tampering implies intent to deceive. The audit never gave legitimate evidence that anyone, other than the dismissed employee, tampered with grades. The bottom line is the students themselves were performing on every measure handed to them.

As Principal, I am accountable for the legitimate issues people may have relative to the administrative policies and procedures on my watch. Where administrative policies may have needed tightening up, I accept responsibility. However, I take no responsibility whatsoever for things that, but for the views of the misled and uninformed, did not happen.

Finally, I feel it is important to consider how we can prevent poorly conducted audits, such as this, from happening again. While I am severely critical of the auditors in this case due to their lack of K-12 knowledge, I know that a positive audit, if conducted internally by the University, would raise questions from the public about a "fox guarding the henhouse" situation, particularly in light of the many challenging issues which have been raised about the University in the recent past. For this reason, any investigation or audit should be conducted by an impartial third party but a party with recognized expertise in the area they are auditing.

One of the most appalling parts of this experience is the fact that my interaction with the auditors was limited to two sessions in the entire seven month period. In the preceding paragraphs, I have touched on a number of the subjects with which they took issue. Imagine how reasonable it would have been for the tone, indeed the bottom-line outcome of the audit, to have changed if I had been allowed to explain some of these basic facts and, in turn, they performed their due diligence to confirm my clarifications? They might have found out that some of the shortcomings they had identified, such as the recording of on-line courses, were already being corrected to show them with alternate course numbers, or that the aforementioned policy for effecting grade changes was already in the staff handbook at the beginning of the 2007-08 school year.

As long as the University, or any public entity for that matter, behaves like this, without a checks-and-balances system, the reputations of both individuals and institutions are unfairly at risk. The University's Principles of Community policy means nothing in such an environment. If you wish to see my full, detailed response to the audit, I invite you to visit my website at [dorisalvarez.org](http://dorisalvarez.org).

To those who have stood by both The Preuss School and me with their support and encouragement, my sincere thanks and gratitude.