

# Portland schools chief told USM he can't support program co-directed by former Kennebunk superintendent

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By Rachel Ohm Staff Writer

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The superintendent of Portland Public Schools told the University of Southern Maine last month he could not continue to support a collaborative program between the K-12 schools and the university because of the co-director's past handling of racist incidents.

In an email Feb. 13, Superintendent Xavier Botana shared his concern with USM President Glenn Cummings regarding Katie Hawes and said he could not support his district's participation in the Southern Maine Partnership program if she remains involved.



Hawes was formerly the superintendent in Kennebunk-based Regional School Unit 21 when an African American teacher in the district accused school officials of discrimination and retaliation in its handling of racist incidents. The allegations were later partly backed up by the findings of an independent investigation that faulted the district's response.

"I wanted to let you know that I communicated to Katie Hawes yesterday that I cannot continue to support Portland Public Schools' participation in the Southern Maine Partnership if she remains involved in it," Botana said in the email obtained by the Press Herald. "I also told her that I do not believe that she should be involved in preparing the next generation of school leaders for the Portland Public Schools."

The email goes on to say, "My rationale is based on a close understanding of Katie's role in abetting racist behavior and retaliating against an African American staff member while she was the superintendent in RSU 21 and my belief that Katie has not owned up to her role in that situation."

The staff member, teacher Rosa Slack, is now working at Portland High School.

The university has been reviewing concerns about Hawes' involvement in the program since January, when Portland Board of Public Education member Adam Burk raised similar concerns at a school board meeting.

The university at that time said it had asked Hawes to “step back immediately from any public-facing role” in her position, such as hosting or conducting training sessions for educators, though she would still retain other duties.

“I continue to be proud of my work at SMP,” Hawes said in an emailed statement Monday night. “This year, under the leadership of me and co-director Angela Atkinson Duina, we have increased membership, grant funding and professional development services. We now have 27 participating districts and offer numerous events such as school visits, discussion forums and educational opportunities.

“Mr. Botana continues to make untrue comments that are based on limited knowledge and unfortunately distract from the important work of this organization.”

Cummings, meanwhile, said he let Botana know the university is taking his concerns seriously and continuing to review the situation.

He said Hawes’ current involvement in the Southern Maine Partnership is minimal and that since Botana raised concerns there are “deeper, more substantive discussions” happening. He said he was limited in what he could say because the situation is a human resources issue.

“We are taking it very seriously,” Cummings said. “We are having internal conversations and we’re reviewing a series of our decisions and looking at what the best outcome would be.”

The Southern Maine Partnership is a collaborative program that connects K-12 schools and USM through professional development, the sharing of research, networking opportunities and other work.

According to its website, the program’s current work focuses on “equity, rigor, and personalization in classrooms, schools, and communities.”

“Our membership represents over one-third of the public school students and teachers in the state and the major teacher education and leadership development university in the region,” the website says.

Botana said in an email that the Portland school district has paid its \$500 membership for this year to belong to the partnership, but he would not answer any other questions. He did not say whether teachers and school leaders are still using the program.

If Portland schools were to withdraw from the program, it could have broader financial implications for the university, said Cummings, who said he feared the decision could impact whether Portland schools continue to use the university for other educational needs.

“If Portland Public Schools were to withdraw from the Southern Maine Partnership it may discourage teachers from taking courses with us,” Cummings said. “That would be a strong financial hit. If the school district were to discourage that, that would have a huge impact.”

Hawes was superintendent in RSU 21 when Slack, a history teacher, [filed a Maine Human Rights Commission complaint alleging race-based discrimination and retaliation](#) at Kennebunk High School. [RSU 21 settled the complaint](#) last summer for \$50,000 and an agreement to amend her employee evaluation.

An [independent investigation completed this fall](#) found school officials in RSU 21 did not take appropriate steps to respond to Slack’s concerns. It stated she experienced harassment by a student and was retaliated against in her performance evaluation after reporting the incident.

In June, Hawes [announced she would be leaving RSU 21](#) for a \$60,000-per-year tenure-track assistant professor position in USM’s educational leadership department. She also started as co-director of the Southern Maine Partnership Sept. 1.

Some members of the university community last summer [raised concerns around Hawes’ hiring](#), which prompted an internal investigation into the hiring process.

The investigation found that [Hawes’ hiring was handled appropriately](#), that university officials knew about the past case in RSU 21 and that they determined Hawes was still the right candidate for the educational leadership position.

In January, at the time school board member Burk raised concerns about Hawes’ role in the RSU 21 case, Hawes said in an email that she was “discouraged and saddened” by his comments and that in reflecting on the events in Kennebunk, there were things she would have done differently.

“I am sorry that any teacher, or student, did not feel safe in our high school,” Hawes said at the time. “I am sorry that I relied upon information from my former administrators without listening more closely to teachers and students, especially those of color. I have learned a tremendous amount through this experience and it has shaped my current personal and professional growth and interest.”

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