

# NM Public Education Department suspends Los Lunas school board

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LOS LUNAS – The Los Lunas school board has been suspended by the New Mexico Public Education Department over allegations that multiple board members violated ethical standards and procurement and public access laws.

State officials made the announcement Wednesday, saying they first warned the board about violations in November and that training for board members followed in January and February.

Despite those efforts, the agency said, unnamed board members persisted in improper conduct.

Education Secretary Ryan Stewart said in a letter to the board that members are entrusted by voters to act in the best interest of the students and have a responsibility to be effective stewards of public resources.

“The conduct of certain Los Lunas school board members is antithetical to these standards and has impeded the ability of the board as a whole to act as expected,” Stewart wrote. “This conduct has created a sense of instability and ethical impropriety negatively impacting all aspects of the district’s operations and severely impairing the educational process in the district.”

Board member Frank Otero said in an email to The Associated Press that he wanted to assure people that he was not among those accused of wrongdoing.

“I was first elected in 2007 and have always conducted business in an honest and professional manner. It seems that I am being suspended for failing to have the votes to carry a majority,” he said.

The other members did not immediately respond to emails seeking comment.

Los Lunas Superintendent Arsenio Romero said he couldn’t comment on the allegations but said in a letter to staff that he planned to work with Stewart to ensure that the school district complies with all orders and actions by the state agency.

“The school board is an integral part of the success of a school district and its student outcomes. It is important that everyone is held to the highest standards,” Romero said in the letter.

With the suspension, the board members are not allowed to contact school staff or use school equipment or facilities, and they cannot use the board’s attorney to represent them.

The Public Education Department said it has credible evidence that one or more board members knowingly misrepresented information in public meetings, violated the state public records law by not producing records as required and bypassed procurement procedures by demanding that contracts for goods and services be awarded to certain vendors.

Other claims include falsifying allegations about financial misconduct, interfering with personnel matters and demanding that family members be hired.

State officials said the information about the violations also was sent to State Police and the State Auditor’s Office.