An open letter to the people of the Sumter School District:

I am a teacher at a Sumter public school. I need my job. I know that revealing my name may cost me my position, yet I can no longer refrain from speaking out. It is not because of a poor economy that we teachers and the children we teach are being short-changed; it is because of GROSS WASTE AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL.

If you doubt my words, just go to the District website (http://district.sumterschools.net) and click on Departments then Financial Division. Look at the credit card charges and then JUDGE FOR YOURSELF. Notice in particular the charges for TRAVEL and ACCOMMODATIONS charged by Mr. Bynum on his district credit card. The second largest group of questionable charges comes from MAINTENANCE. Now, WHY would employees in maintenance need to travel to Myrtle Beach, Virginia, Charleston, and Orlando? District spokespersons ALWAYS have an excuse for outlandish charges: “This was for TEACHER DEVELOPMENT,” or “We HAVE to spend money on MANDATED ITEMS.” Well, most of those answers can be refuted. But even for the few that are valid, where is it written that District employees (and that includes Mr. Bynum – he IS after all an employee) have to stay at 5 star hotels costing $300 - $500 a night? Why are they staying at OUR EXPENSE at a casino hotel in Biloxi? (Check it out folks. It’s there on the July 2012 credit card bill posted on the District website.) For those of you who don’t want to bother pulling up this information, here is a simple summary I made from bills dated October 2011 through August 2012.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Hotel/Transportation</th>
<th>Food/Refreshment</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bynum</td>
<td>$23,382</td>
<td>$6585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td>12,265</td>
<td>995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
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<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Totals</td>
<td>$41,192</td>
<td>$7721</td>
</tr>
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Just to keep things in perspective, pull up Richland County District One (a district much larger than Sumter) and check travel expenses for the same period. Compare the two. It’s an eye opener. When this was brought to the attention of one board member, the response suggested that Sumterites should be grateful that the district even CHOOSES to post this information for all to see. In reality, the districts have NO CHOICE about posting their finances. It is mandated by our state. Think about what was just said, a sitting board member had no idea that each school district is mandated by our state to post expenses. Unbelievable.

Apparently Mr. Bynum and the School Board think it is OK for him and other employees in the District Office to travel out of state and to Myrtle Beach and Charleston and to stay at the most expensive hotels available, but it is not OK to give me and every other teacher in this
district the pay raises we deserve and were promised. It is OK for them to stay at the Beau Rivage Casino Hotel and at the Walt Disney World Hotel, but it is not OK for me to take my students on a simple local field trip because such a trip is “too expensive.” My husband and I would like to take just ONE of these trips and stay in a posh hotel, but WE CAN’T AFFORD IT. Apparently Mr. Bynum thinks the tax payers can afford it for him. Maybe I should ask for a district credit card too so I can get free entertainment and lodging at taxpayer expense.

Following the example Mr. Bynum sets, I might have the solution to some of our problems. For example, I have no district money with which to replenish supplies my students will use the rest of the year. Because I care about my students and don’t want them to do without, I will go into my pocket and spend the little money I make to supply my room. But this won’t be a problem if I can use the district credit card to buy supplies! And another idea: maybe I should use the district credit card to pay for the classes I have to take in order to renew my teaching certificate. Those classes are very expensive but cost only a drop in the bucket compared to what is being charged to the district in terms of travel and leisure. It appears that the public is paying for Mr. Bynum’s membership in various organizations. What’s one more charge when compared to all the others? Maybe I can use the district credit card to take my students to science camp for a day. That would fall under travel, right?

When I questioned all the large charges for food (like a Sumter caterer for $1010 and Simply Southern Bistro for $1400+), I was told these were for “teachers’ workshops, or “development,” etc. Well, I would like to make something very clear right now: I am a teacher, and I have not so much as sniffed a chicken mini from Chick Fillet (an $887 charge in June). I have never gotten a single roast beef sandwich (Arby’s over $500 in one month alone). I have yet to meet one teacher who has eaten on the district dime or who has yet enjoyed a steak from the Outback at the public’s expense (December charge of $528). So please spare me the “explanation” that this food was for the teachers or for some kind of teacher workshops. (And what’s with a charge on Mr. Bynum’s credit card for $1133 to a company that sells photographic equipment? I can’t wait to hear the explanation for that one).

And you out there who agree that these charges constitute waste, you haven’t heard the worst of it: did you know that your district superintendent (I assume with the blessing of the School Board) has hired a New York firm to come down to Sumter, SC, to show whoever it is at the district level that doesn’t know this, how to “interpret data”? The cost to you, the taxpayer? $200,000 PLUS (you guessed it) travel and lodging expenses. I guess bringing this team of instructors down at our expense makes far more sense than sending ONE representative from the district to New York to get the information.

Mr. Bynum does not know me personally; in fact he doesn’t know me at all. He has never been to my room; he has never spoken a word to me. I have been told he has visited our school, but you wouldn’t know it by me because I have never seen him in my school. He has never made it a point to introduce himself to me. In fact, he has insulated himself from me and the other teachers by setting up a strict “pecking order” as to whom we can take our problems, complaints, and grievances. There are at least six people between Mr. Bynum and myself. I will never get a personal audience with this man, who is supposed to be my “boss.” He seems very uninterested
in my views or my troubles. I suppose that is why he can refer to me as “Human Capital” (his term for our dedicated teachers).

What this board and Mr. Bynum fail to understand is that we teachers are ANGRY. And we get ANGRIER every time we see him and others take trips to California, Colorado, and Illinois. We are angry because we are told day in and day out that this district is broke, that we are operating at a deficit. We are told that the district is too broke to give us the step increases we have ALREADY EARNED, yet not too broke to pay for district employees’ travel, hotel bills, cab fare, food, and car rentals. This practice is a SLAP in the faces of all teachers. And tax payer, it’s a slap in your face too. You’re footing the bill for this fiasco.

We teachers are ANGRY that our principals, vice principals, and CRTs are all swamped with “Sweet Sixteen” Yes THEY are the ones responsible for doing 75% of “Sweet Sixteen” evaluations. This adds up to be three or more evaluations per week. Plus, they must enter the information into survey monkey. (Time consuming) Why are they doing 75% of the Evaluations instead of the people that were brought in to the district office to complete this “process?” We are paying “these administrators” over $100,000.00 per year and what do they do? They pass the buck to our individual school administrators who are already busy with everyday occurrences at our schools. Our principals are run ragged by Mr. Bynum.

These problems, complaints, and questions are well-known to our school board. Yet with only one year of his three year contract completed, they voted to EXTEND MR. BYNUM’S CONTRACT not by one year but by TWO. What was the rush? Why were not some of these questions answered and problems addressed BEFORE deciding whether or not to retain Mr. Bynum? Could it be because there is an election coming up and the board may have a few new faces after that? Maybe. There IS one clearly logical answer: this school board either doesn’t know, doesn’t WANT to know, doesn’t care, or worse, approves of what’s going on.

I do not know where to begin with this new “Common Core” that we teachers have to implement. (Others states are implementing this as well but not with the difficulty our district is having.) When the parents see the way our students will be graded, it should create an outrage in the community. Questions should be asked as to who is spear heading common core in our district, and why it seems this person or these people seem clueless as to what they are doing and why they can’t answer simple questions from our school administrators. (Remember we teachers must go through our administrators to ask questions.)

I do not expect anything to change with this letter; but I will continue teaching (unless I am fired for being outspoken) because I LOVE teaching. I love my students and my co-workers. I will not resign. I WILL, however, work through the ballot in an attempt to change things. Some members of this school board have forgotten that among the many responsibilities of a board member is the duty to act as a WATCHDOG to prevent public funds from being used either illegally or unwisely. I will work hard to see that every member of the school board who votes to support this district’s grossly negligent spending policies is defeated in his or her re-election campaign. I will do whatever it takes to make sure that voters are informed and know what is really happening with our school district. I will make sure that as many voters as possible know which school board members rubber stamp whatever Mr. Bynum does without making an honest
evaluation as to the wisdom or necessity of his actions. They will know which board members have the conscience and backbone to stand up for the teachers, the children, and the tax payers and which ones support a superintendent and other district employees who lavish themselves with luxurious lodging and unnecessary travel at our expense. You know who you are, and I hope in the near future, EVERYONE will know so they too can work for your political defeat.

Sincerely,

A Sumter School District Teacher