

For Agency Use Only
Docket Number: _____

:

KRISTEN PEDERSEN : BEFORE THE SCHOOL

v. : ETHICS COMMISSION

OF NEW JERSEY

JOSEPH ABOU DAOUD, Vice President, : SCHOOL ETHICS ACT

Westwood Regional School District Board of

Education

_____ : COMPLAINT FORM

I, Kristen Pedersen, residing at [REDACTED] Westwood, NJ 07675 (cell phone: [REDACTED]) request the School Ethics Commission to consider a complaint against the above-named Respondent(s) whose home address is [REDACTED] Westwood, NJ 07675, in accordance with the authority of the School Ethics Commission to entertain such complaints under N.J.S.A. 18A:12-21 et seq.

The facts upon which this complaint is based are as follows: *(Please print additional pages as needed. Students should be identified by initials only.)*

1. Statement of facts:

On May 4, 2021, the Westwood Regional School District (“WWRSD”) Superintendent, Dr Raymond Gonzalez, notified district families of his resignation, effective August 1, 2021. This resignation followed months of outrage from district families stemming from concerns surrounding Dr. Gonzalez’s lack of leadership, honesty, transparency and acting in the best interest of students. Many of these upset parents vocalized their concerns during the monthly Board of Education (“BOE”) meeting public sessions leading up to this date. Please refer to **Exhibit A** for email communication from Dr. Gonzalez to the district community regarding the resignation.

2. Statement of facts:

On May 10, 2021, the BOE President, Matthew Perrapato, and BOE Vice President, Joseph Abou Daoud, co-issued an e-mailed letter to the community expressing their regret of Dr. Gonzalez’s resignation, publicly appraising the Superintendent, and discussing the plans to backfill the position. It was later admitted that Perrapato and Abou Daoud refused input from their fellow Board members, and that their fellow Board members did not agree with the wording of this letter. Please refer to **Exhibit B** for letter from Perrapato and Abou Daoud.

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Date of occurrence: May 10, 2021.

I assert this to be a violation of: School Ethics Act 18A: 12-24.1d, 1e.

d. I will carry out my responsibility, not to administer the schools, but, together with my fellow board members, to see that they are well run.

e. I will recognize that authority rests with the board of education and will make no personal promises nor take any private action that may compromise the board.

3. Statement of facts:

On May 13, 2021, during the monthly BOE meeting, it was brought to light that the May 10th letter disseminated by Perrapato and Abou Daoud was completely plagiarized and stolen from another New Jersey school district. Please refer to **Exhibit C** for original statement, which is dated July 14, 2019 and belongs to the Montclair public school district. Certain Board members expressed concern over this letter because the Board was not permitted by Perrapato and Abou Daoud to contribute to the authoring of the communication, and many members did not agree with the sentiment of regret. When asked to address the plagiarism, Mr. Perrapato's behavior was disgusting. Mr. Perrapato stated numerous times that he did nothing wrong and that he was not apologizing. Several other Board members called for his and Mr. Abou Daoud's immediate resignation due to their unethical behavior and putting the entire Board at risk. Several other Board members engaged in screaming matches at each other, while others later issued disparaging remarks to and about members of the public.

Date of occurrence: May 10, 2021.

I assert this to be a violation of: School Ethics Act 18A: 12-24. 1a, 1b, 1d, 1e.

a. I will uphold and enforce all laws, rules and regulations of the State Board of Education, and court orders pertaining to schools. Desired changes shall be brought about only through legal and ethical procedures.

b. I will make decisions in terms of the educational welfare of children and will seek to develop and maintain public schools that meet the individual needs of all children regardless of their ability, race, creed, sex, or social standing.

d. I will carry out my responsibility, not to administer the schools, but, together with my fellow board members, to see that they are well run.

e. I will recognize that authority rests with the board of education and will make no personal promises nor take any private action that may compromise the board.

4. Statement of facts:

As a result of this 7 hour long, atrocious meeting, an approximate 5 minute long recap of the meeting, particularly focused on the BOE's many forms of unethical behavior (plagiarism, disparaging remarks to and about members of the public, members actions which jeopardized the integrity of the entire Board) was created and posted to YouTube. This 5 minute recap includes the following disclaimer:

"This video contains various clips of ethical misconduct and inappropriate behavior by certain members of the BOE which occurred throughout the duration of a 7 hour long meeting (held on May 13, 2021). You are encouraged to watch the full 7 hours for full context of the clips shown in the 5 minutes here. This video is only intended to provide a brief recap of the

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many forms of misconduct displayed throughout the meeting, including but not limited to plagiarism and BOE members making disparaging remarks of the public community members."

The link to the YouTube video is as follows:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3mGf6WJ27w>

5. Statement of facts:

On May 19, 2021, Mr. Perrapato issued a public apology for his plagiarism. Please refer to **Exhibit D** for this communication.

During the weeks after this May 19th communication, the Westwood and Washington Township communities continued to express outrage over the acts of plagiarism conducted by Mr. Perrapato and Mr. Abou Daoud, and continued to call for their resignations. Members of our community called for the removal of plagiarism policies for the children of the district if BOE leadership was evidently guilty of such and no action was taken against them. How can our children possibly be held to higher standards than the President and Vice President of our Board of Education? The outrage and upset was vocalized by countless parents across many social media platforms, during subsequent BOE meeting public sessions and across the community.

6. Statement of facts:

At the June 30, 2021 BOE meeting, it was announced that Mr. Perrapato had resigned. While no explanation or reasoning was provided for his resignation, the parents of our district were overwhelmingly pleased with the news. However, many of us are still awaiting the resignation of the co-plagiarizer, Mr. Abou Daoud, and wondering why that has not yet occurred.

7. Statement of facts:

On July 2, 2021, I received a FedEx letter which was left on my doorstep while I was away out of state. The only reason I know it was delivered on July 2 is because my home security system has the delivery recorded. Please refer to **Exhibit E** to review what was contained within that FedEx delivery. A very similar letter was also sent to Mr. Douglas Cusato, a Washington Township NJ resident. It is unclear at this time if similar letters were sent to additional members of the public.

The letter dated July 2, 2021 is grossly inappropriate and is a disgusting attempt by Mr. Abou Daoud to silence, intimidate, retaliate against, and harass members of the public who have vocally called out his unethical behavior. This letter is a false allegation against me and Mr. Cusato, it is defamatory, and it has no merit. My actions to date have been nothing except honest and sincere. I have and will continue to advocate for better leadership within our Board of Education. Mr. Abou Daoud has acted with zero integrity, zero honesty and extremely unethically.

Date of occurrence: July 2, 2021.

I assert this to be a violation of: School Ethics Act 18A:12-24.1a, 1d, 1e, 1f, 1g

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- a. I will uphold and enforce all laws, rules and regulations of the State Board of Education, and court orders pertaining to schools. Desired changes shall be brought about only through legal and ethical procedures.
- d. I will carry out my responsibility, not to administer the schools, but, together with my fellow board members, to see that they are well run.
- e. I will recognize that authority rests with the board of education and will make no personal promises nor take any private action that may compromise the board.
- f. I will refuse to surrender my independent judgment to special interest or partisan political groups or to use the schools for personal gain or for the gain of friends.
- g. I will hold confidential all matters pertaining to the schools which, if disclosed, would needlessly injure individuals or the schools. In all other matters, I will provide accurate information and, in concert with my fellow board members, interpret to the staff the aspirations of the community for its school.

8. Statement of facts:

Furthermore, it has come to my attention that some if not all the legal expense incurred because of these frivolous claims against me are being paid for with taxpayer dollars. Additionally, as we can see on the legal invoice (**Exhibit F**), the current Superintendent, Dr. Raymond Gonzalez, appears to have initiated the legal guidance that resulted in me receiving the July 2nd letter. What vested interest would a Superintendent have in helping a Board of Education President attack a member of the public? Doesn't the Superintendent report to the BOE? This appears to be a conflict of interest. A Board President can't possibly be responsible for evaluating the performance and success of a Superintendent if the Superintendent is helping that President cover up ethical misconduct and helping that President attack members of the public who bring it to light.

Date of occurrence: __May 24, 2021 to current__.

I assert this to be a violation of: School Ethics Act 18A:12-24 Conflict of Interest 12a, 12b, 12c, 12d, 12e, 12f AND School Ethics Act 18A: 12-24. 1i

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18A:12-24. Conflicts of interest

- a. No school official or member of his immediate family shall have an interest in a business organization or engage in any business, transaction, or professional activity, which is in substantial conflict with the proper discharge of his duties in the public interest;
- b. No school official shall use or attempt to use his official position to secure unwarranted privileges, advantages or employment for himself, members of his immediate family or others;
- c. No school official shall act in his official capacity in any matter where he, a member of his immediate family, or a business organization in which he has an interest, has a direct or indirect financial involvement that might reasonably be expected to impair his objectivity or independence of judgment. No school official shall act in his official capacity in any matter where he or a member of his immediate family has a personal involvement that is or creates some benefit to the school official or member of his immediate family;
- d. No school official shall undertake any employment or service, whether compensated or not, which might reasonably be expected to prejudice his independence of judgment in the exercise of his official duties;
- e. No school official, or member of his immediate family, or business organization in which he has an interest, shall solicit or accept any gift, favor, loan, political contribution, service, promise of future employment, or other thing of value based upon an understanding that the gift, favor, loan, contribution, service, promise, or other thing of value was given or offered for the purpose of influencing him, directly or indirectly, in the discharge of his official duties. This provision shall not apply to the solicitation or acceptance of contributions to the campaign of an announced candidate for elective public office, if the school official has no knowledge or reason to believe that the campaign contribution, if accepted, was given with the intent to influence the school official in the discharge of his official duties;
- f. No school official shall use, or allow to be used, his public office or employment, or any information, not generally available to the members of the public, which he receives or acquires in the course of and by reason of his office or employment, for the purpose of securing financial gain for himself, any member of his immediate family, or any business organization with which he is associated;

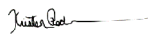
i. I will support and protect school personnel in proper performance of their duties.

I am respectfully requesting that Mr. Abou Daoud be removed from the Westwood Regional School District Board of Education for the violations previously listed.

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WHEREFORE, I, as Complainant, request that the School Ethics Commission find and determine that the above-named Respondent(s) has violated the School Ethics Act and that he or she be subject to such penalty as provided by the Act.

Date: July 10, 2021 _____

DocuSigned by:

8A898D083C4F4F4...
Signature of Complainant
or his or her Attorney

CERTIFICATION UNDER OATH

(Name of Complainant), of full age, being duly sworn upon his or her oath according to law deposes and says:

1. I am the complainant in this matter.
2. I have read the complaint and aver that the facts contained therein are true to the best of my knowledge and belief and I am aware that the statute that created the School Ethics Commission authorizes the School Ethics Commission to impose penalties for filing a frivolous complaint. N.J.S.A. 18A:12-29(e). I am aware that if the respondent alleges that the complaint is frivolous, I shall have 20 days from receipt of the answer to respond to the allegation.
3. The subject matter of this complaint is not pending in any court of law or administrative agency of this State. I will advise the School Ethics Commission if I subsequently become aware that it is pending elsewhere.

NOTE from K.Pedersen – refer to hard copy sent via certified mail for notarized certification under oath.

DocuSigned by:

8A898D083C4F4F4...
Signature of Complainant

Date: _____ July 10, 2021 _____

Sworn and subscribed to before me this _____ day of _____, _____.

Notice: All final decisions issued in connection with complaints that come before the School Ethics Commission for review and determination are public records uniformly posted on the Department of Education's website at <http://www.nj.gov/education/legal/>. As a general rule, selective requests to remove a particular decision for reasons of personal preference are not entertained.

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Exhibit A

From: Westwood Regional Schools <no-reply@wwrsd.org>
Date: May 4, 2021 at 8:40:04 PM EDT
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: A Message from the Superintendent
Reply-To: no-reply@wwrsd.org



Dear Parents/Guardians, School and District Staff:

In 2006, I joined the Westwood Regional School community as the principal of Berkeley Elementary School where I was introduced to a dedicated staff, welcoming community, and amazing students. Changes in life and new opportunities eventually led me away from the district for a brief amount of time; however, in 2014 I was granted the privilege to lead the district as the Superintendent equipped with new knowledge, skills, and expertise.

Since that time, together, we have accomplished many great things for the entire school community guided by our strategic plan and district goals. Our holistic approach prioritized student achievement, health and wellness, safety and security, technology and infrastructure, and facilities improvements. To get a glimpse of all that we have done, [check out our Points of Pride by clicking HERE](#). In addition to the summary of district achievements, the success of our efforts is also validated by the incredible accomplishments of our students during their time in our schools and as they move on to the colleges and careers of their choosing. I could not be more proud of our students.

Now, almost seven years later, it is time for me to move on once more; therefore, effective August 1, 2021, I will be stepping down as the Chief School Administrator to join the Westfield Public School District as their new Superintendent of Schools. I am humbled and honored to have served all of you and, after I leave, I look forward to hearing about the continued success of our students for years to come.

Sincerely,

Raymond A. Gonzalez, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools



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Exhibit B

From: Westwood Regional Schools <no-reply@wwrsd.org>
Date: May 10, 2021 at 6:33:50 PM EDT
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: A Message from the Board of Education President and Vice President
Reply-To: no-reply@wwrsd.org

To the Westwood Regional School District Community,

It is with regret that we will be voting to accept Dr. Gonzalez's resignation as Superintendent of The Westwood Regional School District effective August 1, 2021, at our May 13th public meeting of the Board of Education. We congratulate Dr. Gonzalez on his new position. During his time in our school community, Dr. Gonzalez's passion, care, and advocacy for the children of our district was evident. We thank him for his service to Westwood, Washington Township, and our six schools.

The Westwood Regional Board of Education recognizes the District's need for consistent leadership. The Board of Education will be meeting in Executive Session on Thursday evening, before and after our public meeting to discuss a transition plan and steps that will be taken toward the ultimate goal of recruiting and appointing a Superintendent. That plan will be shared with the community as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Matthew Perrapato
Board of Education President

Joseph Abou-Daoud
Board of Education Vice-President



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Exhibit C

<https://baristanet.com/2019/07/montclair-boe-president-statement-on-superintendent-resignation/>

Montclair BOE President: Statement on Superintendent Resignation

Baristanet Staff - July 14, 2019

Montclair BOE president Eve Robinson gave Baristanet a statement Sunday regarding news of [Dr. Kendra Johnson leaving her position as Montclair Schools Superintendent](#):

"It is with regret that we will be voting to accept Dr. Kendra Johnson's resignation as Superintendent of Montclair Schools at our next board meeting. We congratulate Dr. Johnson on her new position. During her time in our school community, Dr. Johnson's passion, care and advocacy for the children of our district was evident. We thank her for her service to Montclair and our schools.

The Montclair Board of Education recognizes the District's need for consistent leadership. The Board of Education will be meeting in Executive Session on Monday evening, after our public meeting to discuss a transition plan and steps that will to be taken toward the ultimate goal of recruiting and appointing a permanent Superintendent. That plan will be shared with the community as soon as possible."

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Exhibit D

From: Westwood Regional Schools <no-reply@wwrsd.org>
Date: May 19, 2021 at 3:27:53 PM EDT
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: A Message from the Board of Education President
Reply-To: no-reply@wwrsd.org

Dear Westwood Regional School Community,

First, I would like to acknowledge and take complete responsibility for the May 10 message that I sent using the words of another school district to inform you of the next steps in our search for a new superintendent. Following the formal resignation of the Superintendent which coincided with the birth of my third son, my primary intention was to get a message out to the school community as soon as possible using an announcement I found online as my template. There was no malicious intent in my action and I sincerely apologize for it. I want to reiterate that I remain fully committed to my role as a member of this Board, demonstrating ethical leadership, and doing what is best for ALL of our children.

Next, I would like to share the latest developments regarding the search for a new superintendent as a result of action taken by the Board of Education on May 13. During the public meeting, the Board approved three motions to direct the Board Secretary / School Business Administrator to:

- Request any current lists of interim Superintendents from the NJ Department of Education, the NJ School Boards Association, the NJ Association of School Administrators, and the NJ Association of School Business Officials.
- Advertise as needed and appropriate.
- Formally solicit proposals for search firms who can work with the Board to conduct a search for a full-time Superintendent.

In addition, pursuant to Bylaw 0155, I have created co-chair positions for the Superintendent Search Steering Committee of the Board of Education for the purpose of facilitating the general work, partnering with the Board Secretary/School Business Administrator, advising on the logistical aspects of the items listed in the previous paragraph, and providing timely updates to our school community regarding the progress of the search. The co-chairs of the ad hoc committee, who will collaborate with the other members of the Board of Education, are Ms. Roberta Hanlon and Dr. Frank Romano.

Best,

Matthew Perrapato
WESTWOOD REGIONAL BOARD OF EDUCATION
President

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Exhibit E

Deutsch Atkins & Kleinfeldt, P.C.

ATTORNEYS AT LAW

NEIL H. DEUTSCH¹
BRUCE L. ATKINS, AV^{®2}
ADAM J. KLEINFELDT¹

DEBRA M. MCGARVEY¹
DIANE ENGLANDER PEYSER

OF COUNSEL
LAURA G. WEISS³

21 MAIN STREET, SUITE 352
COURT PLAZA SOUTH
HACKENSACK, NEW JERSEY 07601
TELEPHONE: (201) 498-0900
FACSIMILE: (201) 498-0909

WEBSITE: www.deutschatkins.com
E-MAIL: DALAW@deutschatkins.com
WRITER'S DIRECT E-MAIL: batkins@DeutschAtkins.com

ONE BLUE HILL PLAZA
P.O. BOX 1647
PEARL RIVER, NY 10965
(845) 920-0200

260 MADISON AVE., 17TH FLOOR
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10016
(800) 498-0991

Please respond to the Hackensack Office

July 2, 2021

ADMITTED IN NJ
ADMITTED IN NJ & NY¹
ADMITTED IN NJ, NY & FL²
ADMITTED IN NY³

NOTICE OF CEASE AND DESIST

VIA FEDERAL EXPRESS

Ms. Kristen Pedersen
[REDACTED]

Westwood, New Jersey 07675

Re: **Joseph Abou-Daoud**

Dear Ms. Pederson:

This firm represents Joseph Abou-Daoud ("Mr. Abou-Daoud"), Vice President of the Board of Education for the Westwood Regional School District ("WWRSD").

It has come to our client's attention that on May 16, 2021, you posted a spliced video of Mr. Abou-Daoud on YouTube titled "BOE Ethical Misconduct" in an attempt to cast him in a false light and defame his character. Specifically, you altered the zoom video of the May 13, 2021 WWRSD Board meeting to mislead the public to believe that Mr. Abou-Daoud's statement, "well you have half a brain, yes I said you have half a brain" was in response to Board member Sembler's demand for him and President Matthew Perrapato to resign.¹ This is a false and misleading portrayal of what really transpired at the meeting.

The actual May 13, 2021 zoom video footage reflects that Mr. Abou-Daoud remained silent during the entire discussion and never responded to Board member Sembler's comment. Rather, Mr. Abou-Daoud's statement occurred in a totally different part of the meeting in which he

¹ See the link below to the May 16, 2021 "BOE Ethical Misconduct" YouTube video.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=X3mGf6WJ27w&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR0lyN12vvYXcNWv-56hmJlmdkuA-xA7MS1asjhMHS7ju4tWcSo_ALfi7A

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Exhibit E (pg 2)

Ms. Kristen Pedersen

July 2, 2021

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expressed support for the WWRSD teachers.² As such, Mr. Abou-Daoud's actual statement is completely different than what you intentionally and maliciously misrepresented in your May 16, 2021 "BOE Ethical Misconduct" YouTube video.

Your actions, i.e. manipulating the video to mislead the public about Mr. Abou-Daoud's statement with the intent to damage his personal and business reputation by portraying him in a false light, violate the law. Mr. Abou-Daoud is contemplating litigation against you for defamation, libel, false light, and tortious interference. Even more egregious, while altering the May 13, 2021 WWRSD Board meeting video and reposting it to YouTube, you posted the images and likeness of two high school Student Representatives, both minors, without the appropriate parental consent in violation of state and federal privacy laws.

It is hereby demanded that you must immediately **cease and desist** from making false and defamatory statements regarding Mr. Abou-Daoud and must immediately remove the May 16, 2021 YouTube posting and all other published avenues of the altered video clip. Your failure to do so may result in litigation against you.

We reserve all rights to seek damages for any actions that you have taken against Mr. Abou-Daoud to date. Additionally, if there should be any further incidents of defaming Mr. Abou-Daoud or casting him in a false light, this Firm will not hesitate to act as promptly and zealously as possible to enforce all of Mr. Abou-Daoud's legal rights. We will seek injunctive relief and will hold you individually responsible for damages to Mr. Abou-Daoud's reputation and loss of business as well as punitive damages and attorneys' fees.

Lastly, this correspondence advises you that the potential for litigation exists. Thus, it is demanded that any and all tangible and intangible information including, but not limited to correspondence, computer files, computer programs, electronic mail, text messages, word processing documents, multifunctional peripheral hard drives, computer hard drives, mobile telephone hard drives, and any and all other hard drives, memoranda and any documentation and correspondence regarding the altered video that you disseminated on the internet be preserved in each document's native format. You are specifically advised that you may not delete the May 16, 2021 "BOE Ethical Misconduct" video from your computer and any communications, including but not limited to emails and text messages to and from anyone regarding the subject matter of this video. Any destruction of the foregoing will be regarded as spoliation and trigger all appropriate legal consequences.

To immediately avoid further action, please confirm in writing **by July 9, 2021** that you have removed the video and all publications from the internet and that you further agree that you will not repost in the future. If you fail to do so, we will have no choice but to initiate legal action to rectify the damage that you have caused.

² See the link below to the May 13, 2021 WWRSD Board Meeting zoom video footage <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsZ8BUcc8mc>.

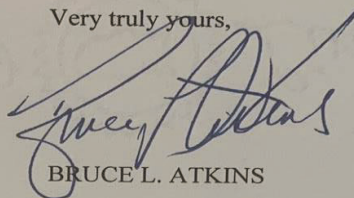
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Exhibit E (pg 3)

Ms. Kristen Pedersen
July 2, 2021
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Be guided accordingly.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Bruce L. Atkins", is written over the typed name.

BRUCE L. ATKINS

BLA/dmm

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Exhibit F

Fogarty & Hara, Esqs.
21-00 Route 208 South
Fair Lawn, NJ 07410
Phone: 201-791-3340, Fax: 201-791-3432
Tax ID: 22-2553510

Invoice submitted to:
Westwood Board of Education
701 Ridgewood Road
Twp. of Washington, NJ 07676

Invoice # 16920

Invoice Date: 06/03/21
Terms: Net 30
Services Through: 05/31/21

Description May 2021

Date	By	Service Summary	Hours/Qty	Rate	Amount
In Reference To: Non-Matter Related (Professional Services)					
[REDACTED]					
05/13/21	RTH	Reviewed documents furnished by Superintendent, agenda and attachments-re: Board meeting	0.50	175.00	\$87.50
05/13/21	RTH	Attended Board meeting	5.25	175.00	\$918.75
05/18/21	RTH	Telephone conference with Superintendent	0.40	175.00	\$70.00
05/24/21	RTH	Telephone conference with Superintendent	0.20	175.00	\$35.00
05/24/21	RTH	Reviewed documents furnished by Superintendent, board policies and YouTube video; Drafted email to Superintendent-re: Edit of YouTube/student image	1.00	175.00	\$175.00
Total Hours:					8.90
Total Labor:					\$1,557.50
Total Invoice Amount:					\$1,557.50

User Summary

User	Hrs	Rate	Amount
Rodney T. Hara	8.90	@ 175.000	1,557.50