



Find DOE Official Misused Parent Aides for Politics

By DAVID SIMS

A senior official at the Department of Education illegally had Parent Coordinators distribute a petition that supported repeal of the “last-in first-out” law governing Teacher layoffs, Special Commissioner for Investigation Richard Condon revealed Oct. 18.

DOE Director of Public Affairs Lenny Speiller was behind a controversial March incident in which Parent Coordinators, District Council 37-represented workers, handed out leaflets that called on students, parents and community members to protest the state’s budget cuts to New York City public schools and lobby for the repeal of “last-in, first-out” laws.

UFT Objected

The United Federation of Teachers, which vigorously opposed the push to end the practice of seniority-based layoffs, protested, with President Michael Mulgrew writing a letter to Mr. Condon about the issue. DC 37 Local 372 President Santos Crespo also complained, saying his members were being used to fight a political battle against the UFT.

Investigators met with several officials at the DOE’s Office for Family Information and Action (OFIA), which was in charge of the “Lobby Week” event for which the flyers were handed out.

Mr. Condon substantiated that Mr. Speiller was the architect of the leaflets, revising a far-more-subdued first draft to include the language about “last-in, first-out.” Mayor Bloomberg was lobbying to repeal the reverse-seniority layoff provision, arguing that the 4,000 layoffs in his proposed budget at the time should be done based on merit.

DOE did not comment on whether Mr. Speiller would be disciplined.

OFIA Executive Director Ojeda Hall, Senior Education Relationship Manager Melissa Harris and Education Relationship Manager Jaclyn Berryman all told investigators that they had written a “benign” copy of the petition that had been approved by a DOE legal counsel.

But Mr. Speiller reworded the document, including language about LIFO, and presented it at a March 11 meeting, four days before the petition was given to about 400 Parent Coordinators.

Although Ms. Berryman disapproved of the LIFO reference, she said Mr. Speiller overruled her and said it would not be a problem. She said that she and Ms. Harris crossed out the inappropriate language, but Mr. Speiller then “mised” them and handed out the petition on March 15.

Ms. Hall said that she did not see a copy of Mr. Speiller’s petition, although she apparently received an e-mail that included the updated language. Ms. Harris said the DOE’s attorney was not consulted about the revised petition.

‘Alternative Language’

Mr. Speiller told SCI that he had “offered alternative language” at the March 11 meeting but had not thought the petition would be distributed with his language included. Instead, he said he thought it would be used at a parent information session held by the DOE.

He acknowledged, however, sending several e-mails with the revised petition, including one to Micah Lasher, the Director of the Mayor’s Office of State Legislative Affairs.

Mr. Lasher’s assistant, Steve Williams, replied to the e-mail saying, “I prefer your revisions to the original. How much support do you think they can generate for the petition?”

“Although Speiller maintained that he did not expect his language to be used in a petition meant for parent coordinators, SCI credits the statements of all the participants who attended the March 11 meeting who reported that Speiller did expect his language to be adopted,” Mr. Condon said in a letter to Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott.

“We find that Speiller’s use of public resources—Parent Coordinators—to promote a partisan position—overturning LIFO—violated the constitution of New York State,” he continued. SCI is referring the matter to DOE for “appropriate action.” Mr. Condon also noted that the Conflicts of Interest Board could take up the case.