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Letter: Where is accountability?

Thursday, June 5, 2003

Is the new six-year contract for Beverly's superintendent of schools valid?

According to reports in the Beverly Citizen, the School Committee recently approved a new six-year contract in response to rumors that Dr. William Lupini was seeking employment elsewhere.

All School Committee members' terms expire at the end of this year. Of course, they can run for re-election. However, it appears that at least three members have decided not to. (Interestingly, one of those to run for re-election, Ward 4's Nancy Brusil, is the only one who voted against the new contract). We now have a lame-duck School Committee and a superintendent with what appears to be a very nice contract, complete with annual pay increases, that won't expire until 2009.

A goal of the Education Reform Act of 1993 is accountability. Everyone is familiar with MCAS, but another element of the act removed most hiring responsibilities from School Committee purview. School Committees are now only allowed to hire superintendents. They no longer hire principals. This responsibility is given to the superintendent. Terms of the principal's contract are determined by the superintendent. The superintendent also decides whether or not to renew a principal's contract. Even if they disagree with the superintendent's decision there is little the School Committee can do to. Principals, unlike teachers, cannot unionize. They serve purely at the pleasure of the superintendent.

Good intentions notwithstanding, the Beverly School Committee's recent action has provided the tools for a potential educational nightmare. The mayor is the de facto member of the School Committee under the 1993 law and must abide by the superintendent's contract (whether he voted in favor or not). A six-year contract is tantamount to School Committee members ceding their responsibilities to the superintendent, making them unable to properly represent their constituencies. The superintendent can thumb his nose at poor School Committee reviews if he so desires. Principals become afraid they will lose their jobs if they do not fully please the superintendent.

The City Council is the only entity with even a modicum of ability to assert any control. In addition to their legislative function, they approve the annual school budget. The council could reduce that budget by the superintendent's raise, for example. Then again, what would motivate the superintendent to reduce his salary by that amount when he could simply reduce another item in the budget?

"Absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Is a six-year contract valid?

I strongly urge the City Council to take action now. You can order the city solicitor to immediately investigate the legality of a six-year contract and report his findings back to both the council and School Committee no later than the end of June. At that point, corrective action must be initiated ... whatever that might mean. Special meetings should be held during the normally quiet summer months, if needed. The students of Beverly cannot wait six long years.

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