

Everett schools blasted in state audit

Unlicensed teachers, fake bids are cited

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At least 50 Everett schoolteachers have never been licensed to teach in Massachusetts, despite the school system's reports to the state that almost all of its teachers were certified, according to a state audit released yesterday.

The sweeping, highly critical, 90-page audit also said:

The school system spent \$59,000 of tutoring money on noneducational items, including the homecoming parade and the lettering of football team helmets.

The school system accepted a dozen fake bids for maintenance work and approved another 18 that were questionable.

The city had weak oversight of the school system budget, allowing the district to overspend \$1.2 million over four years, which has led to tax increases.

The school system misused more than \$830,000 in grant funds, spending the money to pay existing teachers, for example, rather than following the rules and using it for new hires.

The audit's findings, state officials said, go far beyond the allegations that surfaced in March 2004 when Superintendent Frederick Foresteire and 10 others were indicted for bid-rigging. Many of the findings were surprising and broke state and federal laws, said State Auditor Joseph DeNucci.

"The overall mismanagement of the system is certainly evident," DeNucci said. "There are a host of issues here and I can't even pick it apart. It's troublesome. You can go on and on. It's pretty messy."

The audit of the 5,300-student school system and its \$53 million budget does not blame one person for the school system's mismanagement, but points fingers at the maintenance director for not adequately overseeing bidding procedures, at school

department administrators for improperly managing personnel, at the school committee for letting the budget problems go unchecked, and at the city for not being diligent in tracking expenses.

The audit findings have been turned over to the attorney general's office for possible criminal investigation, and while it is routine to make that move, the auditor highlighted specific findings for authorities, state officials said. They would not specify which findings.

Foresteire, who faces pending charges against him from the 2004 indictment, said he is pleased with the audit's results and that there is no fraud in his school system.

When questioned about specific findings in the audit, he said the audit contains mistakes.

"We did not consciously do anything wrong," he said.

The state auditors and others, however, differed on that point.

The Everett school system, according to the audit, routinely lets unlicensed teachers teach for years by calling them "permanent substitutes," a classification the state Department of Education does not recognize. In addition, the system has filed inaccurate reports with the state on the number of licensed teachers it has on staff.

The state requires that educators be licensed unless they receive a state waiver, but the state grants waivers for only one year, and that's if a licensed candidate cannot be found to teach a particular subject, said Heidi Perlman, spokeswoman for the Department of Education.

To be licensed, teachers must pass a test in their subject area as well as a basic skills test. Of the 244 personnel files reviewed during the audit, 87 Everett educators had licensing issues, with most of them unlicensed. Everett reported far fewer unlicensed teachers, saying that 90 percent of its nearly 300 regular academic teachers were licensed."The misreporting to the DOE? That's crazy. I don't know how they got away with that one," DeNucci said.

Foresteire said many school systems struggle with teacher licensures. He said 14 of the teachers cited in the audit have recently received their licenses. All of them had college degrees, even if they did not have teaching degrees, he said.

"These are very serious allegations if they're lying to the state about how many licensed teachers they have," Perlman said.

Education Commissioner David P. Driscoll, who was unavailable to speak to directly yesterday because he was at a conference on the Cape, said through Perlman that the state will take whatever action is necessary to respond.

The audit also rapped Everett for continuing to disobey a 1999 state order to change its superintendent's contract; unlike in other school systems, Everett School Committee members cannot prematurely end the superintendent's contract with just cause. Critics of the school district's financial management, including Mayor David Ragucci, have been seeking Foresteire's resignation. He was accused in the 2004 indictment of having school-district air conditioners installed in his home.

School Committee chairman David Ela said yesterday that he had not read the audit and would not comment. The School Committee will meet Monday night to discuss the findings.

The audit also noted that the school system has put \$50,000 in 13 bank accounts under the city's tax identification number that city officials do not know about. According to the account names, the money goes toward cheerleaders, student councils, basketball, parent teacher associations, and scholarships.

State officials said they cannot tell if the money is being spent appropriately because the school system did not give them access to the accounts.

"It's a facade. It's a clandestine operation up there," said Stephen Smith, an Everett city councilor.

Other critics of the school system saw the audit as another reason to demand the superintendent's resignation.

"If he's mispending money that's earmarked for children, then he has no right to be in his position," said Mike Hurley, whose two children attend the Lafayette School. "He should resign immediately or the School Committee should fire him. Nobody's really doing their job and checking on each other. There's no trust there."

Ragucci issued a statement that said he is "deeply disturbed and concerned" by the findings and will recommend ways to better oversee the school system's spending.

Others were not optimistic that a solution would come easily, noting that Everett has had problems for years.

DeNucci said that while Everett is only the second school system his office has audited in the last 18 years, he does not think the problems are restricted to Everett.

He audited the Lawrence school system in 1997, which was criticized for a variety of problems, including spending money on noneducational items.

The state auditor's office could create a "division for educational oversight," but other agencies are supposed to handle that chore, such as the Department of Education and the Department of Revenue, he said.

He acknowledged that both departments have been decimated by layoffs over the years.

"All school systems need to come under more oversight," DeNucci said. "I'm not saying every city has the problems that are in this audit, but school departments have to be much more transparent and honest with their citizens."

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