

Rich Township SD 227 Board dismisses superintendent

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The Rich Township High School District 227 Board fired Superintendent Donna Leak on Saturday by a 4-to-3 vote.

“Recently, several issues related to the superintendent’s management of the district have come to the board’s attention,” said board president Cheryl Coleman, reading from a statement. “Such issues relate to the gross improprieties in the process of student expulsions, recommend that the board enter into unenforceable contracts with several administrators and improperly sanction or deny access of the district central office to a board member.”

Such issues were irremediable and required Leak’s immediate dismissal without pay, Coleman said.

Board members Betty Owens, Emanuel Imoukhuede and Shelia Friday voted against the dismissal.

“I’m not convinced the evidence is there,” Owens said. “I haven’t seen it in detail.”

The board didn’t have enough time to consider the matter, Imoukhuede said. “We all are board members, and we should all be informed. For me to open BoardDocs (to view the meeting agenda) and see the issues, rather than be informed in advance — I don’t think that’s the process the board is supposed to follow.”

Friday said that Leak should have been given a chance to improve.

“I do believe Dr. Leak was deficient in her job performance and should have been given an opportunity for remediation,” she said. “Until this week, I was unaware of the potential of Dr. Leak being terminated. I was notified by community members on Monday.”

Board member Delores Woods, who voted for the dismissal, said the public would better understand the decision once the details were made public.

“I would say to you that when you’re able to obtain all of the information, and eventually you will, ask yourself a question: ‘What if this had been me or my child?’ ” she said. “I think you will have a better understanding of what we’re doing.”

Leak, who was present with her attorney, said she had no comment on the situation. She was hired as superintendent in 2010 in a controversial move by the school board, who arranged to misrepresent the public polls to support awarding Leak the job. The closed-door meeting was recorded and the tape obtained by the SouthtownStar.

The dismissal was just the beginning in an afternoon of contract shake-ups Saturday, where about 150 people attended to show support or object to the board actions.

The board voted 4 to 3 to terminate the multiyear contracts of all administrators that did not contain measurable student performance goals. Instead, they voted to offer one-year contracts to Assistant Supt. for Student Learning and Accountability Jennifer Norrell, Assistant Supt. of Finance Michael Engel and Rich East Principal Mark Kramer.

“When it comes down to multiyear contracts, we have been challenged by this community several times,” Coleman said. “We had people come up to the microphone and tell us that we were, in fact, signing multiyear contracts without having student-based performance attached to it.”

The contracts aren’t legal and can’t be upheld in court, Coleman said before the meeting. Performance-based contracts need measurable goals, according to the federal court that found District 159 Supt. Ronald Wynn’s contract void, she said.

In the 2011 case of Wynn vs. Board of Education of School District 159, the court invalidated a multiyear contract that did not contain performance goals but said they would be established later.

Owens, Imoukhuede and Friday again voted against the change of contracts.

“We don’t know the content of the one-year contracts,” Owens said. “I don’t have enough information to vote on it at this time.”

The board also unanimously accepted the resignation of Rich Central Principal Jammie Poole. And in another 4-to-3 vote, it created a position of assistant superintendent of operations and approved hiring Rich South Principal Cynthia Hudson to fill it.

“I don’t have a problem with the creation of the position,” said Friday, who voted with Imoukhuede and Owens against the measure. “I have a problem with the process of how it took place.”

Some board members had no knowledge of the position, which was posted Monday and filled by Thursday, she said.

“The process is faulty when you have board members who don’t know interviews are being held for positions and are left totally out of the loop,” Friday said. “It’s not right. Some may say it happened like that in the past, but if it wasn’t right in the past, why do we think it’s going to work now?”

Coleman said the position was recommended by interim director of human resources Doris Langon.

“I’ve always been told we don’t get involved in the day-to-day operations but accept the recommendations from the administration,” she said. Teachers and parents have been complaining about classes that are too full and schedules that don’t allow time for band, she said. The position also will oversee expulsions from the three high schools, she said.

“This position is crucial and needs to be in place immediately,” Coleman said.

Imoukhuede called the position’s creation a unilateral action by Coleman. “I was not informed,” he said. “Other board members were not informed, and this stumps me.”

Community members spoke to the board for an hour and a half, criticizing either Leak or her dismissal. The comments grew heated, and several audience members were removed by security as arguments broke out. As the situation deteriorated, the board voted to adjourn.