

THE READERS' FORUM

School Board attorney doesn't deserve raise

The proverb says opportunity knocks only once. One knock came during last week's School Board meeting when members had an opportunity to evaluate the job performance of the board's attorney, Johnny Brown. But the majority took a pass on evaluating one of the most important jobs in the district.

Residents expect accountability from public officials. Evaluations are a good tool to determine how they are serving the public interest. At the school district all personnel receive an annual evaluation, including the superintendent.

Yet the majority took a hands-off attitude toward evaluating the attorney. Brown's record begs for an examination. Last year, for example, his lapse in judgment cost the School Board more than \$600,000 in back taxes and penalties related to real-estate transactions.

The district is tax-exempt. But when it buys land it often agrees to pay the portion of the property tax

owed by the seller. To the board's chagrin, Brown failed to pay those taxes for almost 10 years.

Paying \$600,000 for an employee's mistake is inexcusable. These are taxpayers' dollars. Yet the check was written, and Brown wasn't reprimanded. Shouldn't we, his bosses, ask some pointed questions?

The School Board has taken considerable heat because of land acquisitions. The state appointed an oversight board to review some district programs. For over a year, both boards have been at odds, yet during that time the board attorney has failed to adequately provide legal guidance on the vested authority of the oversight board. This has resulted in an embarrassing spectacle.

Recently, board members expressed dissatisfaction with the attorney's inability to furnish consistent legal counsel about the superintendent's authority over the internal auditor. In another lapse, Brown admitted that his legal opinion had

precipitated board action when none was needed.

Legal inconsistencies place the School Board in a precarious position where the only winners are those board members with a political ax to grind. Teachers, parents and students lose. That is unacceptable.

Last week, without much discussion, board members Michael Krop, Betsy Kaplan, Robert Ingram, Solomon Stinson and Gus Barrera gave Brown an 8 percent increase to his almost \$200,000 salary, plus benefits. That's a raise of nearly \$16,000 a year, and more than the annual salary of a district school-bus driver.

No other school-board attorney in Florida receives an annual automatic salary increase regardless of performance.

When opportunity knocks, our children should be the winners.

MARTA PEREZ

Miami-Dade

School Board Member

Miami