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Power-hungry superintendent teaches bad civics lessons

By Michael Lewis

Let's hope a judge gives Miami-Dade Public Schools students a vital civics lesson this week. The superintendent should get the same lesson — and a reprimand.

The case to be heard today (3/29) in circuit court will help decide who's really in charge of the schools — the board we elected or the superintendent the board hired.

Capitalizing on board weakness, Superintendent Rudy Crew has had the temerity to seize control of what members can discuss in their own public meetings and even limit what they can discover about school finances.

It was easy to keep members in check — except for Marta Perez, who has a penchant for asking about spending and a push to be heard. Dr. Crew refused to answer her seven public-records requests about finances, including for costs of renovating the board's offices. He also refused to let her put four items on the agenda, saying the topics were none of the board's business.

Dr. Perez didn't cave in. She sued Dr. Crew for the information and the right to talk in public. The information issue went to a magistrate for resolution; the right to get on the board agenda is due to be discussed in court today.

What kind of lessons has Dr. Crew been teaching?

- Thumb your nose at the bosses. Now that you're doing the job, they can't fire you, so push 'em around.

- Keep things secret. What they don't know can't hurt you.

- The public has no rights. The records Dr. Perez requested should be available to every member of the public — but you can stonewall 'em.

- Muzzle elected officials. Board members can't talk among themselves in private — it's against the Sunshine Law — so if you keep them from talking in public, you can control everything they do.

When Dr. Perez asked Dr. Crew for records she had every right to get as his boss, as an elected official and as a member of the public, he wrote her:

"I do not believe that the effort required of my staff to gather and organize the information regarding job descriptions and cost of all board office renovations ... is an effective use of their time."

That could be the response of every public servant trying to hide facts from the public. That's why Florida has a Sunshine Law, requiring that requested information be turned over in a timely manner.

But even were there no Sunshine Law, can you imagine anyone telling his boss that answering her questions isn't an effective use of time so he's not going to do it? Dr. Crew, that's your boss asking. What nerve!

Now, it's perfectly true that Dr. Perez asks about a whole lot of things. She's nosy. She can be a nitpicker and a nuisance.

But she was elected to ask. Whether she's on target or way off base, she deserves answers on two grounds — she's the boss, and it's the law. What part of that doesn't Dr. Crew understand?

Besides withholding information, Dr. Crew is choking discussion. If members can't get items on their agenda, they can't discuss them. That may be fine with him, but the superintendent has no right to limit free public discussion. It's the board's agenda, not his.

But Dr. Crew and his attorney have decided the law lets them control the agenda. Several board members disagree, and they're right. It's not the law that gives him the power but the muscle he wields over a compliant board. That's the issue in court today.

Of course, the fight to pry loose information is costing big bucks. Board members are paying Dr. Crew's attorney \$450 an hour of public money to keep the public in the dark and muzzled when it suits the superintendent to do so.

And so, his other lesson to date:

- It's on your nickel. Whatever I screw up, you pay for.

All of this is upside down. The board hires the superintendent, who should realize that he is employee, not boss. But the board lets him get away with murder — murder of our rights. What is this teaching young people?

Let's hope that this week's court case is a better educator, one that teaches that might does not make right, that public information is indeed public and that public service should be exactly that — public service.

Dr. Crew should be lucky not to get detention.