

SCHOOL BOARD

Independent inspector general important to fighting corruption

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Herbert Cousins, inspector general of the Miami-Dade County Schools, is more prone to listening than to speaking. He was hired in June 2003, but, by design, we hardly know him. The School Board pays his expenses, but his investigations are independent of the board and the superintendent.

When addressing us at a recent conference, Cousins pled for independence and asserted that, if the resources

that the district provides his office are further eroded, his job will be like "playing golf with one hand tied behind his back."

Establishing an independent Miami-Dade Office of Inspector General, overseen by the Florida's Office of Inspector General, has been a long and difficult process. We are the nation's fourth-largest school district, with a budget of more than \$4.5 billion, and as we all know, large-budget urban politics are fertile grounds for mismanagement and corruption.

In 2000, the School Board rejected my first proposal for an independent I.G. office, but public and media scrutiny revealed more cronyism and

suspicious deals, none of which were ever reported to the state's I.G. office. This culminated in "an offer they could not refuse." In May 2002, the board finally passed an item requesting the Legislature and Gov. Jeb Bush to establish an independent Office of Inspector General.

Not only has this been good PR for the district, but it has resulted in a better school system with higher ethical standards and better governance.

The state's I.G. office is housed in geographically inconvenient Tallahassee, and despite all the allegations of corruption and waste in our local system, not one complaint had ever been filed in Tallahassee. In the first year,

the local I.G. office opened more than 90 cases out of countless more complaints.

So what now? Cousins, a former FBI bureau chief with an impeccable reputation, has stated that he is preparing more than one indictment that would recover thousands of dollars in district funds. It doesn't require much skepticism to recognize that those who did not favor a local I.G. office, which is charged with ferreting out waste and corruption, now would salivate at the opportunity to declare that the district cannot foot the bill for such an office. Inspectors general need independent counsel, auditors, investigators and other resources. Scrutiny and safety are not free.

The Miami-Dade County Commission, with a comparable overall budget, spends \$3.5 million on its I.G. offices; the School Board's I.G. office had operational expenses of about \$800,000 in its first year ending in June.



Even so, some board members balked at the spending, claiming that we were taking monies away from "the children." Also, an auditor assigned to the I.G. office by our previous superintendent has been withdrawn. This is shortsighted, however, because part of the board's business function is to

foster an environment of trust in government. People know that they can file a complaint with the local I.G. office, confident that competent parties will take their concerns seriously — independent of the district's central office or any elected officials.

The School Board must thwart the calculated depletion of the I.G. office and its meager staff and resources — in the name of fiscal discipline. The impetus to remove district reforms and the gatekeepers will create renewed opportunities for corruption, at the expense of our children.

Marta Pérez is a member of the Miami-Dade County School Board.