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Yes, try a little openness

By RANDY PUGH

It has been three years since James Veitenheimer was hired as superintendent of the Keller school district. Trustees hoped that our district would be able to put seven years of financial mismanagement and human resource abuses behind us as we looked forward to a future of exemplary leadership.

At first, Veitenheimer's cheerful smile and past experience were a refreshing change. However, within a few months, the level of communication between the school board and the superintendent's office seemed to be lacking.

As depicted in the April 12 editorial "Try a little openness," Trustees Cindy Lotton, Bob Apetz and Linn Jencopale say that the other four board members are the problem. Their public comments suggest that I am one of the biggest problems because, in their view, I am "micromanaging."

State law requires the superintendent to seek prior board approval and open bidding for any expenditure exceeding \$25,000. School district personnel also are expected to avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest.

Here are some of the incidents that have prompted the board majority's growing concern:

Veitenheimer failed to disclose, until confronted by the board, that his direct relative was hired by a district vendor after Veitenheimer was hired in July 2004. The vendor was under scrutiny by the board at the time, and its contract was eventually terminated.

In February 2006, Veitenheimer's administration exceeded by \$121,000 the amount authorized by the board for payment to a consulting firm.

In March 2006, without board knowledge or approval, Veitenheimer entered into a contractual agreement for about \$400,000 with the Texas Education Agency.

It was recently disclosed that Veitenheimer's administration incurred expenses of about \$100,000 with an unauthorized vendor. The *Star-Telegram* disclosed district documents designed to cover up this transaction, as well as an attempt by high-level officials to coerce a district employee to sign them. Two top administrators have resigned.

These are the most serious, but by no means all, of the instances of misfeasance that have surfaced. The administration repeatedly has withheld information from, or provided misleading information to, the board and the public.

Academically, the district's rating from the TEA dropped from exemplary to recognized and now to acceptable over seven years. Keller High School has dropped from exemplary to acceptable -- a sad commentary for a school that once was chosen as a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence by the U.S. Department of Education.

During the past three years, the board has approved and funded 100 percent of the academic goals recommended by the administration to regain the exemplary status. The administration has spent 100 percent of that money but has met less than 50 percent of its goals in each of those years. The Veitenheimer administration's most significant academic accomplishment has been to burden teachers with the botched implementation of the ongoing curriculum audit -- an audit intended to help them.

I invite anyone interested in the truth to contact me. I will sit down and document everything I am saying. The Texas Education Agency has in its possession this very proof.

I recommend that you also contact the three board members who are in full support of what this administration has done and ask them to document the accusations that they have leveled against their fellow board members -- allegations that are as truthful as a wax apple is nutritious.

These three trustees will never be accused of micromanagement -- they support the superintendent, right or wrong. They are the quintessential "rubber-stampers."

The other four members, including myself, see things differently.

Micromanagement should never be an issue, because the Keller school district should have a superintendent who is so competent, ethical and forthcoming that trust in him is without reservation.

As trustees of tax dollars and children's futures, board members have the responsibility to put in place an administration that inspires that kind of trust. If we have failed, that is our failure.

If district residents vote against me in the upcoming election, I hope it is because of this very real failure, not because of some figment of three overactive imaginations.