dallasnews.com
The Dallas Morning News

Comments | Recommended

Lancaster ISD trustees hire lawyer to investigate superintendent

12:08 AM CDT on Wednesday, July 30, 2008

By KATHY A. GOOLSBY / The Dallas Morning News
kgoolsby@dallasnews.com

Lancaster school trustees hired an attorney late Monday to investigate claims raised by the board president that Superintendent Larry Lewis withheld information from board members and tampered with their mail.

The 5-2 vote came at the end of a contentious meeting that ended after midnight. Trustees Ed Kirkland and Marie Elliott, who cast the dissenting votes, tried unsuccessfully to have the item removed from the agenda.

Board President Carolyn Morris said after the meeting that the investigation is necessary to restore confidence between the trustees and Dr. Lewis.

"There is a lot of frustration on the board, and we need to clear the air," Ms. Morris said.

The trustees hired Dallas attorney Harry Jones, who specializes in employment and school law, to conduct the investigation. The board will meet with Mr. Jones to negotiate his fee before he begins work.

Dr. Lewis spelled out the allegations against him before the vote Monday night.

"They need to make the allegations public because there is so much speculation in this city as to what this superintendent has done, and none of it is true," he said.

Board members voted 5-2 last month to hire a lawyer to investigate Dr. Lewis but refused to disclose their complaints.

Dr. Lewis said Monday night that one of the accusations is that he intentionally withheld from the board a preliminary audit report that the Texas Education Agency sent to the district.

He said he discussed the report with Mr. Kirkland, who was board president then. Ms. Morris said later that other trustees also should have received copies of the report.

The final audit, which was released in June, found numerous financial problems in the district and culminated in last month's appointment of a conservator to oversee Lancaster's finances.

TEA officials said Tuesday that they could confirm only that the preliminary report was sent to the district but did not know whether it was addressed to individual trustees.

Dr. Lewis disputed the complaints of mail tampering, which he said arose after the TEA mailed copies of the final audit report to the district in one box containing individual envelopes with trustees' names on them. He said district officials opened the envelopes, inserted a report summary written by the district, resealed the envelopes and delivered them to trustees' homes.

"It was sent to ... [the district] to courier it to their home, so it was not U.S. Mail," Dr. Lewis said.

The meeting started late and was slowed by heated bickering between trustees and disruptions from the audience.

Trustees argued throughout the meeting over agenda items, and Dr. Lewis twice halted the proceedings to warn spectators to stop making loud comments and applauding while others were speaking. He asked district police to remove anyone who refused to comply.

Trustee Marjorie King said the repeated rancor makes it difficult to focus on the board's work.

"It's in our ethics to listen to others politely," Dr. King said. "We may differ with one another, but we need to have respect, and it doesn't sound like we are respecting one another."