

# Ensuring Ethical Behavior of School District Leaders

By Robert Ruder, Ed.D.

When employees of public school entities retire after 35 or 40 years of service, they usually take with them a reputation built on goodwill and trust within the community in which they worked. The school community celebrates their accomplishments with luncheons, receptions, and dinners all designed to show appreciation for all they have done for the organization and for the students it serves. While their physical departure is immediate, their legacy continues.

But what happens if months later, evidence emerges that the educator behaved in a manner that brings into question his or her ethical, moral, and professional standards and casts the organization in a negative light?

Such a scenario recently eroded the public's trust in education in northeastern Pennsylvania.

Prior to retiring, the executive director of an intermediate unit (an organization comprised of 20 school districts within a specific geographic region) authorized a payment of more than \$600,000 to himself.

Utilizing a right-to-know request, *The Scranton Times-Tribune* newspaper obtained copies of the personnel payroll data sheets that verified the administrator's signature on the approval lines.

According to an article that appeared in the September 1, 2010 edition of the newspaper, there was an authorization of payment for 724 accrued days, which included 405 sick and personal days, 289 vacation days through the 2009–2010 year, and 30 vacation days for the 2010–2011 year. Based on the administrator's per diem rate of \$663, the amount he believed he was due for the unused vacation days for the 2010–2011 year amounted to \$19,890. However, the administrator retired in June, which should have made him eligible for 15 vacation days.

Another personnel/payroll data sheet indicated that the administrator authorized a payment of more than \$140,000 to himself for a retirement incentive. This amount was based on 90% of his salary plus an annuity. Separate from the Pennsylvania Public School Employees' Retirement System, the annuity payments went to a retirement account designed to provide the administrator with \$550 every two weeks at the conclusion of his contract.

The Intermediate Unit's Board of Directors acknowledged that they demonstrated a "lack of oversight." This lapse in oversight is having serious repercussions within the education entity and the community it serves.

Most noteworthy is the involvement of the state auditor general's office in determining how much money the former executive director can be paid for accrued sick and vacation days. In addition, the Intermediate Unit's board declared that the former employee is ineligible for the retirement incentive he was awarded.

Further fueling the public's perception of the former executive's payout was a letter written by a member of the intermediate unit's board and read aloud at a meeting of one of the member school boards that indicated that few of the board members knew the terms of the former executive director's contract and were not aware of the provisions in his successor's contract.

The dilemmas facing the former and current executive directors of the intermediate unit, the administrative staff, the board of directors, and the 20 member school districts and their boards of directors and the community has placed the entire entity under the collective microscopes of all taxpayers whose dollars support the IU as well as member school districts.

The process of untangling this complicated mess and answering questions regarding the ethical and professional behaviors of individuals in leadership roles within the educational community will not be an easy task. Reputations will be tarnished, the memories of acts of goodwill and kindness will be replaced by mistrust.

## Keeping the Trust

While this scenario brought to the forefront the shortcomings of an established education agency, other school districts can learn valuable lessons related to the ever-present need for ethical and responsible operations.

Education entities must have safeguards in place that prevent unethical behaviors and internal monitoring systems that assure that those in positions of leadership and authority do not break the sacred trust they have with their constituents.

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