

Lee schools job finalists criticize list of internal promotions

Sunday, November 19, 2000

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Several finalists for top-level school administration jobs believe a case of favoritism worked against them during a token interview process with the Lee County School District.

Nine of the last 10 high-ranking positions have been filled by internal candidates, drawing criticism of discrimination in the selection process. Some candidates have the college degrees, experience and background, but lack one thing - their paycheck doesn't already come from Lee County schools.

The string of internal promotions is upsetting to those who think they weren't given a fair shot at a district job because they are outsiders to the school system. Several finalists say they walked into the interview room and saw internal candidates gabbing and laughing with the interviewing board.

"It made the interview a joke because everybody came over and shook the lady's hand before we even started," said Walter Tarwid, a finalist for executive director for support services. "When you see things like that, don't even waste our time. It was a farce. When I came home, I told my wife who would win the job."

Twenty-three-year Lee district employee Gay Thompson, the only internal applicant among nine candidates, was awarded the support services job in October.

At the same time, a newly created position of chief financial officer went to 7-year employee Bob Spencer, the only internal candidate among 13 who applied.

The trend of internal promotions began this summer with the selection of Sharon Benner as assistant superintendent. She was the only internal applicant among the eight who submitted resumes.

Ernie Scott, the former head safety inspector, was promoted three weeks ago to the new position of program administrator for safety, security and inspections. Former personnel director Gail Williams was laterally transferred into the equity director spot. Two more administrative positions, director of maintenance and director of construction services, were offered Thursday to Donald Easterly and Tyler Patak - the only two internal candidates among nine finalists.

Despite the streak of internal promotions, the district contends that the process is fair and doesn't give preferential treatment to buddies of the school system.

"We hire the best person for the job," said Lynn Strong, executive director for human resources. "You don't get more points for internal or external. We don't do that anymore. That's the good ol' boy system."

But after promoting Benner to her present position, Superintendent Bruce Harter said Benner's intricate knowledge of Lee County and Florida education standards, as well as her dedication and experience, pushed her over the top. Conversely, an outside candidate has to display all those characteristics during the standard three-hour interview.

All in the family

The Lee County School District rewards long-term employees. In May, board members recognized 108 district employees celebrating their 25th, 30th and 35th anniversaries.

Often, those employees work their way through the ranks to more lucrative jobs. That was the case with Benner and Thompson, each of whom started as classroom teachers in the 1970s.

Top-level administrative hires within the past five months have all been groomed in the local education system. The average amount of Lee district experience for six key administrative positions - chief financial officer, executive director for support services, director of maintenance, director of construction services, director of personnel and assistant superintendent - is 17 years.

Three other high-level positions - program administrator for Grant\$, director of equity and also the program administrator for safety, security and inspections - were awarded in October to existing district employees.

The only outsider who has landed a central administration position recently is Brevard County's Jim Langholz, who started work Monday in the mid-level administrative role of coordinator of psychological services. It doesn't surprise him that internal candidates usually are promoted.

"They sort of have the inside edge because they know the system," Langholz said.

"One of the advantages we bring is that we understand the system because we've grown up in it," said Thompson, who admits being "a little scared" in a position where her experience is limited. "You know the individuals who you will be working with."

One of the finalists for assistant superintendent was Candace Brown of Bridgton, Maine, who felt the district was open-minded during the interview, but realized that "the vast majority of time the interim person receives the position."

Four of the jobs became available through an administrative restructuring following the fire safety crisis, which showed that hundreds of fire code violations went uncorrected for years.

Lehigh Acres assistant chief/fire marshal Henry MacArty thought the School District could use an expert in the areas of fire prevention and fire codes, so he applied. He said he isn't surprised that internal candidates are being promoted across the system, but doesn't think that someone involved in the controversy should have been considered.

"If you were working for them internally and didn't do anything about it, I don't think it will change much now," MacArty said.

Not every external candidate felt like an underdog.

Samy Faried, executive director for the Lee County Regional Supply Authority, didn't notice any preferential treatment of the internal candidate during his interview for director of construction services.

"It was a fair meeting," he said. "I didn't feel they treated me any different."

Schmoozing before hiring

Tarwid, director of engineering services for KPM Properties Inc. in Cape Coral, strolled into Lee School District headquarters on Oct. 23, confident that his 21 years of managing maintenance and plant operations would push him over the top for the support services position.

"When I walked into the lobby, I said 'Aw man, what a bunch of crap,' " Tarwid reflected.

He saw Thompson casually chatting with the interviewing board, a group of people she was familiar with from her two decades in Lee County.

Alfredo Menendez, a finalist for director of maintenance, saw the same bond exhibited between one candidate and the interviewing board. After being informed by the Daily News that Easterly, the internal candidate, was chosen, he said he wasn't surprised.

"Everybody was talking with him and smiling," said Menendez, director of plant maintenance for Miami Dade Community College.

Unique interview process

When a position opens, the district advertises that vacancy for at least one week on the school system's Web site. Top-level positions also are advertised in state or national trade publications.

Once applications are gathered, resumes are passed between a selection committee of 12 to 20 members comprised of administrators, advisory committee members, principals, parents and other district staff. That group whittles down the list to between three and five candidates, who have a week or two to prepare for interviews.

"It's the most unique interview process I've ever seen," said Noah Powers, a former assistant superintendent in Georgia with 30 years of experience. "Typically, you don't have all the candidates together."

The interviewing board splits into about three subgroups, asking candidates the same questions and recording responses. The board then creates a scenario that the candidate might face in the job, giving the applicant 15 minutes before making a formal presentation on how the situation should be handled.

Menendez said the stressful mock-scenario situation isn't appropriate for an interview because forcing administrators to scramble on important decisions rarely nets positive results.

"If that's the way they work over there, then I don't want to be a part of it," the Miami resident said.

Various components of the interview, personality and other character attributes are rated by each member of the interviewing board, which then compiles results and provides the superintendent with names of the top two candidates. Harter then presents a recommendation to the School Board, but he isn't required to select the panel's No. 1 candidate.

School Board members must approve the nomination before it is finalized, although they rarely blink at the motion.

"The superintendent's recommendation carries great weight because the only reason we can reject it is for good cause," School Board member Terri Wampler said.

Wayne Klingelsmith, system director of plant operations for Lee Memorial Health System, thought he landed a district job three weeks ago.

He was one of four finalists who interviewed in late October for executive director for support services. He performed well, and was summoned by Harter for a one-on-one interview the next morning. When leaving the district office, Klingelsmith said Harter told him to "let me know your decision by Thursday," and assumed he was offered the job.

By that Thursday morning, however, there was a different story.

"When I talked to Dr. Harter and he said, 'I'm sorry, but the job is going to an internal candidate,' it knocked my socks off," Klingelsmith said. "It seemed like the decision was in my court, but apparently it was not."

Pieces match the puzzle

Following the closure of Lee County's desegregation lawsuit in 1999, the district was required to give minority applicants a fair shot. But the requirements say nothing about giving external candidates the same privilege.

Of the district's 214 total administrators, 87.4 percent are white. The district has made it a priority to search for minority applicants, and has even gone out of state to recruit.

A few gender disparities have appeared during the hiring process. A majority of applicants for directors of maintenance and construction were men, as were all finalists.

But the assistant superintendent search netted eight candidates, and the three finalists were all women. None of the five men were invited for interviews to replace retired female administrator Jane Kuckel.

Four of the 13 applicants for chief finance officer were women, but none of the females made the finalist list.

Three additional administrative vacancies were posted Monday. Applications for deputy superintendent and budget director are due Dec. 1, and resumes for staff attorney must be received by Dec. 15.

Powers, a finalist for both finance officer and executive director for support services, is applying for deputy superintendent. He is a former insider, having served as the Lee district's assistant director of finance in the 1970s, and he is optimistic that the interviewing board will at least be open to hiring someone not currently on the payroll.

But Tarwid said the internal hiring trend is in place, and describes the token interview process as "ludicrous" because the district's powers-that-be already have their person picked out.

"I could have bet the farm that the selected candidate would win," he said.