

Patronage and Profit in Schools: A Tale of a Bronx District Board

Suspected Payoffs and Larceny Are Chronicled

**By RALPH BLUMENTHAL
with SAM HOWE VERHOVEK**

Members of a school board systematically turned a Bronx district into an enterprise for patronage and profit by trading jobs for political favors, seeking payoffs, putting relatives on the payroll and allowing school supplies to be looted, according to board members, school workers and secret records obtained by The New York Times.

The board, District 12 in the south-central Bronx, which ranks last out of New York City's 32 decentralized school districts in reading and mathematics test scores, is one of several that prosecutors and city officials are examining for a range of abuses. The allegations prompted Mayor Koch this week to call for a special investigative commission with broad powers to compel witnesses to testify about school corruption. Yesterday he said he would explore the possibility of setting up such a panel himself. [Page B4.]

The Times's findings include these:

¶In the search for a new school su-

perintendent, who is the district's top educator, a forged letter advanced the candidacy of the successful applicant while other well-qualified candidates were unaccountably dropped from consideration.

¶The swing vote for the successful applicant was provided by a board member who described herself as a drug addict and who was depicted by another member and parents as having been incoherent at the meeting. She has been homeless and living on the street and at a drug treatment center for months, but remains on the board.

¶Board members placed family members on the district payroll, with the agreement — as legally provided — of five other members. One member had a brother, a sister and a daughter working in the district.

¶At least two board members took or "borrowed" expensive school supplies, including, in one case, computer equipment intended to serve the educational needs of the district's children.

¶Board members took trips, paid for by the district, to attend education conferences in Las Vegas, Honolulu, San Juan and other resort cities.

'They Don't Want to Listen'

"The way their system works, you could bring in Albert Einstein to run a school and it wouldn't help the children at all," said Maria Colligan, mother of a sixth grader at Community School 102 and a member of the parents association. "The board has cut up the district like a pie and they don't want to listen to what anybody has to say."

According to secret board records obtained by The Times, for example, more than 100 jobs in the \$69.7 million district budget, including classroom aides who assist teachers, are filled through referrals in which individual board members "sponsor" job-seekers.

Often, district employees say, these are people who circulated nominating petitions for board members or did other favors for them, or in some cases

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The New York Times/Angel Franco
Miguel Diaz, head of District 12 Board, dismissed allegations as being part of a plan to discredit Hispanic and black officials.

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paid them off. Such practices would clearly be improper, said a Board of Education official, Tom Ryan, executive director of the Division of Human Resources.

Some classroom aides hired like this were illiterate and unable to fill out the applications, a former board employee said.

No larceny was too petty, accounts by school employees and parents indicated. One former member of a school cleaning crew reported watching an acting principal load a van last summer with shopping bag after shopping bag of pads, notebooks, pens and other school supplies at a time when parents were complaining of shortages of such materials.

The district superintendent, acting on the report, said he found supplies were missing, but he said he could not establish how they disappeared.

An 'Application Fee'

One parent said a board member asked her to pay a \$70 "application fee" for a school cafeteria job she was seeking.

Miguel Diaz, the unsalaried chairman of the board, dismissed the allegations as being part of a racially motivated campaign to discredit Hispanic and black officials and denied an account that he had sought a payment from an assistant principal.

"I'd give you my life if such a thing took place," he said in an interview last month. "I'd let you hang me."

Three other board members who were interviewed denied wrongdoing by the board, but two others said some of the allegations, including the forging of a letter, were accurate.

Robert Zeif, a lawyer hired by the board, said this week that the panel would not respond now to any charges but "will respond in the appropriate forum."

School Board 12 is under investigation by the Bronx District Attorney, Paul T. Gentile, and the central Board of Education's Inspector General, Michael P. Sofarelli.

The city's 32 community school boards were created in 1970, after bruising racial conflicts, to decentralize an unwieldy educational bureaucracy, which now encompasses 110,000 employees and has dominion over 941,636 pupils in 975 schools.

Low Turnout for Elections

The boards are responsible for administering elementary and junior high schools, including hiring teachers and supervisory staff members from lists of qualified applicants and managing district budgets of tens of millions of dollars. They are chosen every three years in elections marked by low voter turnout.

Education experts say this has often allowed a small group of well-organized voters, orchestrated by political clubhouses, to engineer the election of allies. Consequently, the boards have often fallen under the domination of politicians and others seeking personal gain rather than being run by parents and others with a stake in the schools.

School board members are unsalaried — they do receive modest stipends — but they control hundreds of lucrative jobs.

District 12 sits in the south-central Bronx, a vaguely butterfly-shaped section taking in parts of the impoverished East Tremont, West Farms and Morrisania neighborhoods. The district serves 17,542 children in 24 schools.

The entrance to the headquarters for the district, at 1000 Jennings Street abutting the Sheridan Expressway, is crowned with a painted wooden sign: "Children First, Children Second, Children Always."

Tight Control On Filling Jobs

As laid out in confidential board records, the patronage system hinged on the tight control of millions of dollars a year worth of district jobs. The records list the initials of a board member as the "sponsor" of virtually every jobholder.

"It's who sponsors you," said Lucy Cruz, a board member who has emerged as a strong critic of some of the board's actions. "You don't get a job as dogcatcher without sponsorship. They do that to keep tight control of the jobs." She acknowledged in an interview that she, too, had sponsored job-seekers but, she insisted, without a quid pro quo.

Mrs. Cruz said she had become disenchanted with the board but had been



The New York Times/Angel Franco

Some District 12 board members with Wilfredo Abreu, superintendent, fourth from left, at a hearing last month on board members' conduct.

From left were Kenneth Drummond, Arthur Durant, Miguel Diaz, Mr. Abreu, Michael A. Vega, Jose M. Cruz, and Alexander Castillo.

urged to stay on by the Bronx Borough President, Fernando Ferrer, to monitor its actions. Mr. Ferrer confirmed this.

She said the board kept a secret list of jobholders and their sponsors. "It will never be made available, but it exists," she said, unaware that The Times had obtained a copy. She said the list was maintained so that whenever a new coalition took power, the members knew who had been hired by previous coalitions and could be dismissed.

A former executive secretary of the board, Earline Green-Crosley, said she was hired in July 1986 through the sponsorship of Kenneth Drummond, when he was board president, and dismissed in June 1987 after the presidency shifted to another member, Jose M. Cruz.

'How the System Worked'

Mrs. Green-Crosley said that when she first took the \$22,500-a-year job, "I didn't know how the system worked — I would give everyone an application."

Then, she said, "I learned you're supposed to tell them, 'We're not hiring right now.' But if they said the name of a board member, they were supposed to get an application." Often, she said, she would be told in advance to expect a visit from a sponsored applicant.

"The personnel department was not allowed to hire anyone unless told to do so," she said.

Literacy was not necessarily a qualification for classroom jobs, Mrs. Green-Crosley said. "With some of them, I had to help them fill out their applications," she said.

Similar accounts were offered by Bernard Lopez, the \$30,000-a-year executive assistant to the board, who was later dismissed. "Nobody got in without a padrino," or godfather, he said in an interview.

People approved for jobs were often those who collected signatures for board members when they ran for election, said a parent in the district, Ruth Poindexter, who added that she did such political work.

Mrs. Poindexter said that she collected petition signatures for Mr. Drummond, who is still on the board,

Allegations of payoffs and larceny are made in a troubled Bronx district.

but that she never asked for or received a board job.

Another board member interviewed, Arthur Durant, acknowledged the sponsorship system and said a board member's recommendation was tantamount to a hiring. "If a person put a name on the table, we would assume it was O.K.," he said.

Mr. Ryan, the Board of Education's human resources director, said that generally Civil Service rules required appointees to be selected on the basis of merit and fitness. "Adding political qualifications is not a healthy operation," he said. He called it "inappropriate" and said that if the central board had known of this, "we would have told them to stop."

Besides circulating petitions, people attained jobs and promotions by other means, including payoffs, according to some who say they were victimized. And the demands for payments for jobs have been going on for years, the complainants say.

Petra Santos, formerly an assistant principal at Community School 234, complained last year to the Inspector General's office that a board member, Mr. Diaz, asked her for \$5,000 to keep her job after she failed a qualifying examination. She recently repeated the complaint to the Bronx District Attorney's office, according to an official familiar with the investigation. Mrs. Santos said she would not discuss the case while it was under investigation.

Mr. Diaz, in an interview before a Nov. 30 school board meeting, denied pressuring Mrs. Santos in any way and then made his remark about giving up his life if it were otherwise.

'Full of Tears'

Mrs. Poindexter, the woman who said she gathered signatures for Mr. Drummond, said she was among a group of parents present at the district office when Mrs. Santos came out of a meeting with Mr. Diaz and a school principal.

"She was full of tears and upset," Mrs. Poindexter said of Mrs. Santos. "She said she could keep her job for \$5,000."

Peter J. Negroni, then the district superintendent, recalled being in the district office shortly afterward, when Mrs. Santos came in to make the complaint. "I referred her to the Inspector General," he said, adding that it was not his role to inquire into the matter.

Mr. Lopez, the former board executive secretary, recalled placing the call for Mrs. Santos to Mr. Sofarelli's office and hearing her complaint. Lucy Cruz, who said she was also present and kept

track of the case, said Mr. Sofarelli's office never responded.

Mr. Sofarelli did not return repeated telephone calls this week concerning about District 12.

Alicia Olmo, the mother of a child who attends Community School 102, said that about four years ago, Jose Cruz, the board member, asked her for a \$70 payment along with her application for a cafeteria job. "I didn't want a job where I have to pay," she said in an interview while in a roomful of parents last week. She never took the job.

Mr. Cruz denied her account. "No way in the world would I ever do something like that," said Mr. Cruz, a \$30,000-a-year teacher in School District 9. "I have never gained from this position. I'm still as poor as I was 20 years ago."

The Forging Of a Letter

Another allegation of board misconduct involves the selection last year of a new school superintendent and deputy to replace the district's two top officials, Mr. Negroni and Walter Edge, whose three-year contracts were up.

In response to an advertisement, more than 40 people applied, including, according to several lists obtained by The Times, at least five holders of doctorates.

Curiously, a handwritten list contained 39 names of candidates. But a typed version, prepared around the same time and identical except for one additional name, contained 40 names. The addition was the name of Wilfredo Abreu, formerly the district's administrator for special education.

Even as the list was being drawn up, members of the board were taking steps to advance the candidacy of Mr. Abreu.

Without consulting the parents associations in the district, as required, the board had appointed Mr. Abreu as "interim" acting superintendent — a title that does not exist, as the acting schools chancellor at the time, Charles I. Schonhaut, informed the board.

A Shorter List

When a list of applicants for the permanent superintendency was drawn up by the district in January 1988, the list had been pared to 11 names, including Mr. Abreu's.

By way of explanation, a letter over the name of Mr. Lopez, the executive assistant to the board, was prepared for the parents and other members of the screening committee, with a copy to Fred Woodruff, the Board of Education's liaison to the district boards.

Dated Jan. 15, it said in full: "Due to human error, I Bernie Lopez inadvertently combined a number of applications of those applicants who applied for the Deputy Superintendency with the applications of those applicants who applied for the Superintendency of District Twelve."

"Due to this error, the pool of candidates presented to the Screening Committee and to the Community of District Twelve, through a Public Meeting, appeared larger than those presented for the review of the Screening Committee for the Superintendency of Local Community School District Twelve."

Below, over the name of Mr. Lopez, was a scrawled signature.

Mr. Lopez said he did not write the letter and that it was drawn up while he was on vacation.

Jose Cruz, then the board's chairman, acknowledged in an interview this week that the letter had been forged. When asked who had forged it, he replied, "I'd rather make no comment on that."

He maintained, however, that the information in the letter was correct. But Mr. Lopez, who was in charge of compiling the lists, disputed Mr. Cruz's assertion. "He's lying," he said. "With 40, they couldn't push Abreu. Other applicants were more qualified."

Puzzled by Process

Mr. Abreu said he was not aware of having received any favorable treatment and maintained his selection had been straightforward. Parents interviewed said they had no quarrel with Mr. Abreu but were puzzled by the selection process.

Mr. Lopez was dismissed by the board last January after it "eliminated" his job line from the district.

Meanwhile, one of the candidates passed over for superintendent, Alfredo Mathew Jr., a former junior high school principal and superintendent in

District 3 in Manhattan, repeatedly wrote to Board 12 and the central board's president, Robert F. Wagner Jr., asking why he had never been interviewed.

He complained that the board operated "like a junta with its own dictator" in secret meetings in violation of a state law mandating open public meetings.

He said he never got a response.

Disappearance Of Supplies

The Times inquiry found numerous charges of misappropriation of school equipment and supplies.

One board member, Mr. Diaz, "borrowed" a computer and accessories from the district board office two years ago, according to a memorandum he put in board files.

The memo, written Sept. 4, 1986, to Mr. Negroni, then the district superintendent, stated: "Please be advised that I borrowed from District Twelve School Board Office the following Computer and Accessories." It then listed by model and serial numbers, a printer, "typewriter" or keyboard, monitor, A.C. converter and foot pedal.

Mr. Negroni, who now serves as director of an educational council in Catawba County, N.C., said that there was a procedure for borrowing board equipment for work at home on school projects but that he no longer remembered the specific matter.

There was no indication when, if ever, the equipment had been returned. Mr. Diaz, after responding to a reporter's questions at the Nov. 30 board meeting — before The Times obtained a copy of the memo — did not respond to subsequent telephone calls and messages.

A Desk and Three Chairs

On Sept. 22, 1986, according to a similar memo to Mr. Negroni, a board member, George Gonzales, said he had "borrowed" a large desk and three chairs from the district office.

Mr. Lopez, the former board secretary, said he saw people dismantling the desk.

Mr. Gonzales, reached yesterday at the office of his NSB Development Corporation at 2260 Washington Avenue in the East Tremont section of the Bronx, confirmed that he had put in such a memo. But when asked whether he had taken the desk, he replied: "Ask my lawyer."

His lawyer, Peter Rivera, said: "My client, at the appropriate time, will be making a statement. Now is not the appropriate time."

Mr. Negroni said he did not recall the memo but called "borrowing" a desk "rather unusual."

School supplies for students also often disappeared, school employees said.

A principal, Miguel Silen, said in a letter to the superintendent in the fall of 1987 that while he was serving as acting principal of Community School 67 in the East Tremont section, he found that "the school has no school supplies."

Mr. Silen said that he also found no evidence of established inventory procedures for school supplies and equipment and that files on pupils were in "total disarray" and dumped in cartons. In addition, he wrote Mr. Abreu, the school had no workable copying machine to reproduce pupil workbook assignments to make up for persistent shortages of workbooks and textbooks.

'Part of the Cause'

Yet, he wrote, "a vehicle was seen loading supplies, etc., over the summer months" and he added: "Perhaps this is part of the cause of C.S. 67's present dilemma."

In his letter, Mr. Silen identified the source of the information as a person who was "unwilling to come forward for fear of retribution."

"When we received this letter, it was like a bombshell," Mr. Lopez recalled. Within several days, Mr. Silen was reassigned from C.S. 67 to C.S. 66, situated across the street from the district office. In an interview last week, he said that he had requested the transfer as a way of reducing stress and because of a high-cholesterol problem.

Mr. Abreu confirmed this week that he had investigated the reported theft and that supplies were missing, but he added that "we don't know how it happened."

The Times this week found the person who reported the information to Mr. Silen. The informant described

watching from a window as the school's acting principal, Evelyn Hey, and two other people loaded bag after bag of school supplies into a reddish-colored van before driving away. The informant reported recognizing the van as that of a board member, Mr. Gonzales, a close friend of Ms. Hey.

The informant immediately checked the school supply room and found that a lot of supplies were missing.

Ms. Hey did not respond to repeated telephone messages left at her present school, C.S. 92. A Times reporter found her in the district office Wednesday, but she turned away all questions, saying: "I'm against all this publicity. I'm only here to serve the kids."

Mr. Gonzales said yesterday that he had a burgundy-colored van, but added, "I never recall having a van taking equipment from 67." He said of Ms. Hey: "I don't think she is the type of person who would do that."

"Maybe," he said, "she took what belonged to her, not school supplies."

Still, he said, he made a complaint about missing supplies to Mr. Abreu, the superintendent.

Members' Trips To Resort Cities

While supplies disappeared and parents and educators clamored for more teaching materials and staff, board members spent district funds on a variety of trips to professional conferences.

One trip was to Las Vegas for a meeting of the National Association of School Boards. Among those attending was a board member, Alexander Castillo, a former panel chairman. Records in Las Vegas show that he owns two houses there.

Mr. Castillo at first declined yesterday to discuss any holdings in Las Vegas but then said he had property "like any school board member anywhere." He said that he went on the trips for "administration and education" and that he attended the workshops. But asked what the workshops concerned, he replied: "I don't remember what they were."

Asked to Leave Conference

On another trip, two board members were asked to leave the conference because they spent so little time attending sessions. Lucy Cruz recalled a 10-day trip to Southampton, L.I., in November 1987 attended by her, Jose Cruz and Mr. Gonzales at the luxurious Southampton Inn. It was sponsored by the State Division of Substance Abuse Services.

But she said the other two board members spent so little time at the workshops that the sponsors of the conference asked Mr. Cruz and Mr. Gonzales to leave.

Gerald Edwards, president of the Super Teams Operating Company, which ran the conference, recalled this week having had to ask at least one Bronx school board member, whose name he could not remember, to leave. "The rule is, if you come, you participate," he said. "If you don't, you go home."

Mr. Cruz, asked whether he had been told to leave, replied: "To my recollection, no." He said he had only gone to Southampton to monitor the conclave and left on his own.

Board Member And Drug Use

As in District 9, where the arrest of Matthew Barnwell, principal of Public School 53 on drug-buying charges, triggered inquiries into drug problems, questions have been raised about drug abuse by a District 12 board member.

Angela Pacheco, a board member, lived for years with her husband and children in a housing project at 1435 Harrod Avenue, where, a neighbor recently told The Times, drug buyers thronged to the Pacheco apartment.

"There was traffic 24 hours a day," said the neighbor, who asked not to be identified by name. She said crack vials frequently littered the corridor and stairwell outside the Pacheco apartment and the fumes of smoked drugs wafted into the halls.

Mrs. Pacheco was evicted last summer and has been seen living on the street along the Bronx River Parkway. But efforts by The Times over the last few weeks to find her to be interviewed were unsuccessful.

In an interview broadcast last week on WNBC-TV, she said she had been involved with drugs and as a result became homeless. But she contended that using heroin should not necessarily be a bar to serving on a school board.

A Split Vote

At the school board meeting at which Mr. Abreu was selected as superintendent in a split vote, Lucy Cruz and some parents who were present recalled that Mrs. Pacheco seemed to be in a semicoherent state when she voted for Mr. Abreu.

Asked how a drug addict could have been permitted to remain on the board, Mr. Lopez, the former executive assistant, shook his head sadly.

"They wanted to use her, but no one wanted to help her," he said.

Mrs. Pacheco remains on the board. Several of the board members, as well as the district superintendent, said the criticisms leveled at the board were interfering with their efforts to improve children's education. They said they had devised several new programs — including a "Principal's Leadership Plan" — aimed at raising the reading and math scores.

"This year is the litmus test," said Jose Cruz, the board member. "You wait until June, when the test results come out. This district is going to shine. If the scores are not higher then, maybe you could say we did something wrong."

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The community school district is in the south-central Bronx.