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Defenders Say Grier Trips Not a Conflict

Bruce Buchanan

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With critics questioning Guilford County Schools Superintendent Terry Grier's outside business deals, a school district administrator and the head of a company that employed Grier voiced their support for the superintendent.

Grier has been a paid consultant for the Educational Research and Development Institute for the past 12 years. The institute, which is funded by companies that do business with school systems, paid Grier and other superintendents to advise those school vendor companies. Guilford County Schools has a policy prohibiting employees from taking gifts from companies that either do business or desire to do business with the school system.

Grier has said he did nothing wrong and did not violate that conflict-of-interest policy because he was paid by the institute, not directly by the companies. But he stopped working for the institute last month after a newspaper report questioned the relationship between superintendents and the participating companies.

Mike Kneale, the institute's founder and president, said the criticisms of Grier are unfounded. And Sharon Ozment, the school district's chief financial officer, said Grier did not influence the decision to bring a cafeteria-management company to Guilford County.

"To make such an insinuation calls into question my integrity and credibility as well as that of the district's Purchasing Department and the various committee members that evaluated the proposals," Ozment said in an e-mail message.

But Carl Alexander, a Guilford County resident, said that even if Grier didn't make improper business deals, he left himself open for questioning by going to the institute conferences. Grier received \$2,000 plus an expenses-paid trip to a California resort for a three-day July conference. "You do not put yourself in a position where there is the perception you are doing something wrong," said

Alexander, whose grandchildren attend school in the district. He first questioned the link between Grier and the institute last week.

Michael Murphree of the school watchdog group ABC of Guilford County agrees that Grier should never have attended the institute conferences and said the superintendent violated the district's conflict-of-interest policy. He said Grier's attention should be focused on the district.

"The reason we pay such a salary is so these people won't be distracted by outside interests," Murphree said.

Grier makes \$182,000 a year as superintendent.

Sodexo, which runs both the district's cafeterias and custodial services, participates in the conferences. Ozment said Sodexo won the district's business through the normal bidding process.

In May 2002, district officials began the search for a cafeteria-management company. They placed advertisements in 11 newspapers and also contacted five companies that had previously expressed interest in working with the district, Ozment said.

Representatives from those five companies toured district cafeterias in mid-May, and three submitted formal proposals.

The proposals were evaluated by a committee of five Guilford County Schools employees and a representative from the N.C. Department of Public Instruction. Grier was not on that committee, nor was he on a later committee that evaluated custodial services bids.

Ozment said the committee recommended Sodexo because it presented the best contract. The company guaranteed the district more savings than either of its competitors, spent \$500,000 to upgrade local cafeterias and allowed current school system cafeteria workers to keep their jobs.

Ultimately, the school board approved both Sodexo contracts.

The institute's Kneale said Grier and other superintendents provide valuable feedback to companies about how to improve their products and services for school use.

"I think it's very demeaning to think a person responsible for educating children doesn't have anything valuable to share and is only interested in an ulterior motive," said Kneale, the former superintendent of the Colorado Springs, Colo., school district.

He said he started the institute in the 1980s after going into a classroom and seeing new computers going unused. Teachers told him the computers weren't equipped with software that matched their lesson plans. He said he realized then that educators and school vendors needed to communicate more. Kneale said participating superintendents are never asked to buy anything at an institute conference.

He also spoke highly of Grier, whom he described as an innovative, ethical superintendent.

"I only wish (Grier's critics) could focus on what he's doing, rather than the innuendo," Kneale said.