

SARASOTA

Bowden's decision too little, too late

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On Tuesday, Sarasota County Schools Superintendent Todd Bowden placed the district's chief operating officer, Jeff Maulsby, on administrative leave pending the results of an investigation into allegations of sexual harassment by a former administrative assistant that were first brought to the attention of Bowden and board vice chair Caroline Zucker in April.

Yes, April. That's two months to respond to evidence that the district's second in command had been sending his subordinate — according to an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaint filed on June 4 — hundreds of inappropriate messages along the lines of “I'm a beast in bed” and “Don't you have a man? Have Ol' Boy curl your toes.” (Excuse me as I am momentarily overcome by nausea.)

Bowden told Herald-Tribune reporter Ryan McKinnon his belated decision was prompted by emerging details that made “the allegations today much different than they were in April.” He didn't provide any specifics, though he did reference the “extended timeline to conclude the investigation” as also being a factor in his decision.

As far as I'm concerned, “too little, too late” doesn't even come close. For Bowden to have taken more than six weeks to reassign the assistant, Cheraina Bonner, to a different position; to not have censured Maulsby's unprofessional, offensive and misogynistic comments the moment they surfaced publicly; and to chalk up the delay to following “protocol” for administrative investigations is beyond excuse.

But, apparently, Maulsby, a former Sarasota County government employee hired on Bowden's recommendation despite his lack of experience for the job, is a pal. And Bowden, who faced his own accusations of sexual harassment before he was hired, may have been cutting another “good Ol' Boy” some slack.

As long as we're talking in aphorisms, how about “The last nail in the coffin” or “The straw that broke the camel's back?” Bowden's hiring under the shadow of those allegations — an outside investigation found them “inconclusive” and they were swiftly dismissed by the

board (though not by some of us in the community) — gave me pause about his character from the start. But the growing examples of his less than stellar leadership since are approaching critical mass.

For example, though Bowden and board chair Jane Goodwin received legal notice in February that the district was facing a potential lawsuit by a family who maintain their son was inappropriately placed in a class for students with severe disabilities, it took more than five months for the district to file a case with the Department of Administrative Hearings. Coincidentally — or maybe not so much — it was finally filed just a day after the board discussed a different complaint against Bowden (also filed by Bonner) over his mishandling of her initial allegations against Maultsby.

And what about that messy situation with John Russo? The Brookside Middle School teacher was placed on administrative leave for more than a year after a physical altercation with a student the day after the Parkland school shootings that led to battery charges. During that year, Russo says he had no opportunity to discuss the incident with district personnel.

The State Attorney's Office eventually found Russo's actions "unnecessary and inappropriate," but declined to prosecute. However, the district decided to launch its own investigation, resulting in Bowden's recommendation in April that Russo be terminated on the basis of his "past history." What really transpired behind the scenes has never been revealed.

Then there's that bothersome union survey last spring that showed more than 75 percent of some 1,200 district teachers were unhappy with the superintendent's leadership and performance. Sure, teachers and administrators are often at odds and union members are usually unified, but you how can you marshal the troops if they don't believe in you?

Bowden has had a few shining moments, most notably when he took a hard, fast and immediate stand against discrimination toward LGBTQ students. But evidence is mounting that he may not be the best man for this job, despite the board majority's seemingly blind support.

In this case, what's most egregious is the message Bowden has sent to the thousands of students he's charged with inspiring: that if you're in a position of power, it's permissible to be abusive, disrespectful and entitled ... at least until it's no longer legally tenable.

These days I'm inclined to think what we need in the leader of our school district is the same thing we need in the leader of our nation: someone who is honest, ethical, principled and transparent. Whether we'll get either remains to be seen.

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