

Trenton school officials remain cautious over \$979,000 contract

The Times of Trenton by Erin Duffy
on August 28, 2012 at 8 AM,
updated August 28, 2012 at 9:17 AM

http://www.nj.com/mercer/index.ssf/2012/08/trenton_school_officials_remain.html



Mary Iuvone/for the Times
A file photo of Francisco Duran, Trenton superintendent of schools and Toby Sanders, President of the Board of Education

TRENTON — School board members and a union official cautioned against hiring outside one-on-one student aides without first scrutinizing the numbers behind a \$979,000 contract before the board last night, especially as the district prepares to take on hundreds of students from the shuttered Emily Fisher Charter School.

The school board seemed to lean toward tabling the proposed contract with Cherry Hill-based Mission One Educational Staffing Services to provide some one-on-one aides for the district but broke for executive session midway through the meeting and had yet to return and vote on the contract as of press time last night.

The company was hired last year at an initial cost of \$500,000 to provide workers to boost the school's paraprofessional staffing and replace some of the 22 aides laid off in 2010 in a privatization bid that was fought by the district's paraprofessional union. As of January, the company provided the district with 33 aides.

The one-on-one supervision is for students who need individualized care in school, providing help to students whose needs range from a broken leg to developmental disabilities.

School board members Toby Sanders and Sasa Olessi Montaña asked new interim special education director Eniola Ajayi if the district could be certain that \$979,000 would cover the full cost of providing one-on-one supervision to special education and other students.

Last year, Mission One came back before the board twice asking more money be added to its original \$500,000 contract, Olessi Montaña said.

“The concern last year was we approved a number and then less than midway through the school year, the special education department came back and we had to raise that number to about \$400,000,” Sanders said. “The concern is that the logic that we’ve used to estimate here, are you comfortable and are the people you’re working with comfortable we’re not going to have to come back at the end of the year for \$400,000, \$500,000 because we were low-balled?”

Ajayi said the district was using the same formula and projections used last year to estimate how many students will need a one-to-one aide in the classroom.

“Based on estimates from last year, hopefully we don’t have to come back to ask you for more,” she said.

Sanders and Superintendent Francisco Duran said the numbers might need tweaking as the district prepares to absorb as many as 400 students from the now shuttered Emily Fisher Charter School.

The charter school was known for taking in special education students and those with behavioral problems. Duran said another 200 kids are still in the pipeline waiting for assessments to see if they are classified as special education students.

Paraprofessional union president Betty Glenn also asked the board to reconsider contracting once again with Mission One, whose employees have faced complaints from parents unhappy about the care they provided to students.

“Mr. Duran’s motto is ‘children first,’ and Mission One’s motto is ‘dollar first,’” Glenn said. “You have evidence they did not treat our children right.”

The board last night considered a \$3.4 million contract with Source 4 Teachers to provide teacher, secretary and paraprofessional substitutes. Source 4 Teachers is the sister company of Mission One and was hired earlier this year to provide teacher substitutes to the district. The board added an additional \$1.6 million to the company’s original \$500,000 contract in February.

“You have substitutes in the community that will do this,” Glenn said. “You can have parents coming in as sub paraprofessionals.”

Kathy Smallwood-Johnson, the district’s executive director of human resources, said the contract was necessary because the district doesn’t have sufficient staff to cover secretaries and paraprofessionals who call out.