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Delaware: Christina School District to hire consultant for review

Teacher's union opposes use of funds, choice of British agency Cambridge

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<http://www.christina.k12.de.us/>">Christina School District leaders plan to use federal funding to hire a company to review their 28 schools and find ways to improve them, a move the district's teacher union opposes.

The Christina Education Association questions the district's lack of transparency, choice of spending priorities and selection of http://www.camb-ed-us.com">Cambridge Education LLC to receive \$350,000 -- including federal stimulus dollars -- to perform the review.

Acting on the recommendation of a committee that reviewed three proposals to perform the work, the school board approved entering into contract negotiations with Cambridge Education, district Superintendent Marcia Lyles said.

Christina Education Association President Claudia Bock objects to the choice because the company, which has offices in six states, originated in England.

"President Obama has said that we need to grow America," Bock said. "We need to keep our money here and not outsource."

In fact most of the company employees who have worked in 90 school districts in 20 states across the country since 2002 are Americans, said Tim Boyce, regional director of the Northeast region of Cambridge Education, adding that all the money would stay in the United States.

"We do have a division that works in England, but we are a wholly U.S. subsidiary," he said. "This is no hit-and-run British company that's coming in to strip the country of its U.S. dollars."

The district hopes to have a contract signed by mid-December. Review of the schools could begin shortly thereafter. The process of performing a three-day review at each of the schools and preparing a district report is expected to take six months, Lyles said.

Bock questions whether such a review will help students, but Lyles says it will ultimately improve student achievement because it will help create coherence and consistency throughout the district by modeling after the practices and programs that work and eliminating the ones that don't.

"Part of it was an offshoot of the work I did in the first 100 days," said Lyles, who joined the district in July. "The first thing I learned is we have a lot of programs but not a lot of coherence among the programs."

The review also will show where professional development would be most helpful to better prepare teachers, she said.

Bock said she believes the money could be better used to buy teacher supplies.

"We have Smart boards that can't be hooked up because there are no computers," she said, referring to interactive white boards. "The refurbished computers we have are starting to crash. I have schools where the teachers are buying the pencils. They have to bring their own toilet paper in."

Lyles said the district is beginning to do a better job alleviating a lot of those problems, including adding more computers and providing each high school and middle school with a supplemental \$250,000 to \$325,000 to be used "in ways they deemed necessary at their school level.

"Could there be more? There is always the desire for more," Lyles said.

District officials also point out that stimulus money can be used for reviews that enhance effectiveness. And even more important is this: 10 percent of the district's \$11.4 million in stimulus and Title I funding must be spent on professional development, according to federal requirements, and the review ties in with that edict.

"Even if we wanted to take \$1.1 million and spend it on school supplies, we are required to spend it on something else," district spokeswoman Wendy Lapham said. "Our hands are tied in terms of what it can be used for."

Bock said she also did not like the way the review was acted on without any warning.

"I object to the lack of what I consider to be transparency," she said. "I attend every school board meeting. This hasn't been put out. It wasn't on the agenda. It was added to the agenda."

In regard to disclosure, Lyles agrees.

"We weren't overly transparent in how we spent any of that," Lyles said of the stimulus money. "We talked in generalities about what we were going to do."

Lyles said she hopes to meet with Bock so they can talk about the concerns.

"It's not our intent to look over anyone's shoulder," she said of the teachers. "It's our intent to walk side by side to support the work they are doing in the schools."

Boyce said the review will be very inclusive and will include a self-evaluation segment.

"We seek everybody's views on the effectiveness and impact of the schools," he said. "We talk to teachers, we talk to administrators and we talk to parents. It's a baseline check across the district to see what's working well."
