

NESHAMINY

## Board member calls for president's resignation

*The board president referred to an accusation of hiring interference as an ongoing stream of "lies and innuendoes," then made allegations against his accuser.*

By RACHEL CANELLI STAFF WRITER

So much for a board retreat to create respect.

After a recent undisclosed meeting to work on how board members relate, charges and counter-charges erupted during the Neshaminy school board meeting Tuesday night. They prompted a call for the president's resignation and spurred at least one board member to suggest an independent investigation of all the allegations that were made.

Board member Ritchie Webb proposed the idea of an independent probe after fellow board member William O'Connor accused board President Richard Eccles of interfering and influencing a district hiring decision.

While the president didn't admit or deny the allegations, he said his accuser had no physical proof, but that he'd be willing to participate in an investigation.

O'Connor claimed Eccles had a private conversation with Assistant Superintendent Lou Muenker, and a subsequent decision was made not to split one administrative post into two positions, and instead give the single position to a relative of an Eccles' ally.

When asked by the newspaper after the meeting if the discussion had occurred, Eccles said he didn't solicit Muenker. He directed questions to Muenker, who had already left the meeting. During the meeting, Muenker said only that he felt very uncomfortable about being "in the hot seat" over the issue.

He didn't respond Wednesday to e-mail requests for comment.

O'Connor said Superintendent Paul Kadri informed him that the more than \$100,000 temporary assistant principal spot at an unidentified school was initially supposed to be split between two people. Those people were also not named. O'Connor also claimed Eccles acted on behalf of an unnamed political ally, who is reportedly the relative of the candidate who was eventually awarded the sole job.

Kadri said Tuesday night that "at this time," the person who received the job represented the administration's best recommendation.

"[This is] ... gross, inappropriate abuse of an elected official's power," said O'Connor, adding that his problem is with the process not the person. "But it's never too late to do the right thing."

Eccles responded by calling O'Connor's allegations a stream of "lies and innuendoes." He provided an e-mail from former superintendent Howard Wilson, who claimed O'Connor made past requests for two hires, including his daughter. O'Connor denied the accusations.

"You're tainting my reputation," Eccles said. "After 10 years on this board, I've not a mark against me. I've been asked numerous times by [various] superintendents my feelings toward individuals. It's not uncommon, but [his opinion] doesn't make [the hiring] decision. ... You're a hypocrite."

Despite the controversy, the personnel report was approved 7-2, with O'Connor and William Spitz voting no.

O'Connor and Spitz said they regretted making their concerns about the hiring process and board politics public, but claimed they didn't get answers during the recent undisclosed retreat.

After describing Eccles as a dictator who divided the board and usurped Kadri's authority, Spitz called for Eccles' resignation. After the meeting, Eccles called Spitz's and O'Connor's comments "attacks" and "a political circus." During the meeting, he said: "This is a bunch of garbage. Those who know me know better."

Board member Frank Koziol said he didn't see a problem even if the reported private discussion took place. "We're allowed to have a preference," he said.

Some audience members said, "You should be ashamed of yourself " and applauded Spitz and O'Connor.

Other board members, such as Joseph Blasch, said they felt caught in the middle, not knowing who or what to believe. "It's very difficult to know how much is true or not true," he said.

That's why other board members agreed an independent investigation is needed, as well as guiding principles for the board to follow, including respecting each other.

While it is not clear if any steps are being taken to initiate an investigation, the board's policy committee will looking at establishing guidelines for board members, said board member Irene Boyle.