

# East Ramapo may hire Debra Jackson

By JOHN ROCHE

As the Bedford Central School District's search for its next superintendent picks up steam, apparently so does interest from at least one other district in Bedford Central's current superintendent, Dr. Debra Jackson.

Dr. Jackson, who is set to depart from Bedford Central this June after handing in her resignation last spring, is one of two finalists for the superintendent position in the East Ramapo Central School District in Rockland County.

Although Dr. Jackson could not be reached by press time about being named a finalist for the Rockland district's superintendent position this week, East Ramapo school board president Nathan Rothschild said Wednesday that Dr. Jackson is "highly

qualified" and remains in the running for the district's top job when the board selects a superintendent this week.

Mr. Rothschild said that his board was fully aware of the circumstances surrounding Dr. Jackson's resignation and buyout package, which raised the ire of many parents and other residents in the Bedford Central School District, particularly because Dr. Jackson and Bedford Central board members have refused to discuss it, citing a confidentiality clause in the agreement between them.

"It wasn't a concern, because she told us that she did not have to live with the confidentiality because the interview was in executive session, so nothing discussed could come out of

*continued on page 15*

# Bedford Central *February 1 2008* Board says 'move on'

By JOHN ROCHE

Two members of the Bedford Central board of education spoke out publicly this week on the controversial settlement agreement with the district's outgoing superintendent, breaking the board's virtual silence on the accord reached in June that some members of the community have criticized as too costly and ill advised.

School board president Susan Elyon Wollin and board member Mark Chernis made separate statements at a board meeting Jan. 23 regarding the departure agreement reached with Dr. Debra Jackson, whose resignation, submitted last spring, will take effect at the end of the current school year.

In his first public comments regarding the agreement, which has come under fire from some parents and other district residents, Mr. Chernis defended the former board's actions, saying he would vote in favor

of the deal again.

"I want to make it clear that my silence and the silence of other board members was more of a function of trying to be fiscally responsible to the district than our desire to keep information from the public," Mr. Chernis said. "There is absolutely no smoking gun that needs to be kept hidden."

Under the agreement, which contained a confidentiality clause prohibiting the board and the superintendent from discussing the specifics of the deal or the reasons behind it, Dr. Jackson received a \$650,000 lump sum payment compensating her for lost salary for the remaining three years of a five-year contract extension signed in 2006, as well as benefits and credited service for retirement benefits. The deal also provides medical and dental coverage for the 52-year-old Dr. Jackson and her family for  
*continued on page 14*

Bedford Central *January 14 2008*

# Jackson is a finalist in other districts

By JOHN ROCHE

Outgoing Bedford Central schools superintendent Dr. Debra Jackson did not land the top job in the East Ramapo Central School District this week, but said this week that she remains in the running for superintendent positions in other districts.

Dr. Jackson, who is set to leave Bedford Central in June as part of a controversial departure agreement reached last spring with the board, was one of two finalists for the superintendent position in East Ramapo. On Tuesday, that district's board announced its selection of Ira Oustatcher for the job, which he'll begin on April 1.

While Dr. Jackson said she was disappointed in not being named the superintendent in East Ramapo, she

disclosed this week that she is a finalist as chief administrator in other school districts.

"I am a finalist for other positions, but at this time, those districts have not made that public, so I can't discuss the specifics," Dr. Jackson said. "The boards involved have asked me to keep the status of their searches confidential, so I will do so until they make the finalists public, or reach a decision and announce that."

News that Dr. Jackson is being wooed by other school districts irked a number of residents of the Bedford Central district, who this past week reiterated their criticism of the previous board's pact with Dr. Jackson that resulted in her mid-contract resignation effective this

*continued on page 15*

# Jackson's job search

*continued from page 1*

spring, and included a \$650,000 lump sum buyout plus health benefits for life.

Several critics, including former Bedford Central school board president Mark Slivka, said the board made a costly mistake with taxpayer money in formulating the buyout last spring, and questioned why the search efforts by East Ramapo's school board into Dr. Jackson's job performance at Bedford Central "failed to turn up issues of concern from a situation that will eventually cost the Bedford Central School District over \$1 million."

Dr. Jackson submitted her resignation on June 11, although it won't take effect until this coming June 30. According to a 20-page agreement outlining some of the details of her departure, Dr. Jackson received \$650,000, compensating her for lost salary for the remaining three years of a five-year contract extension signed in 2006, as well as benefits and credited service for retirement benefits.

The deal also provides medical and dental coverage for the 52-year-old Dr. Jackson and her family for life. She is also being paid \$243,461 in salary for the current school year.

According to the agreement, Dr. Jackson's resignation stemmed from "a certain dispute [which] has arisen between the superintendent and the board of education with regard to the superintendent's performance of her duties."

This week, Bedford Central school board president Susan Elion Wollin said she and the board wish nothing but the best for Dr. Jackson in her future endeavors, and stressed that the search for her replacement continues. "We are sorry for Dr. Jackson but respect East Ramapo's decision," Ms. Wollin said. "We fully expected that Dr. Jackson would seek other employment. Once again, while we might wish to comment further,

we appreciate the frustration of the community in this regard, we continue to believe at this time that we are bound by the confidentiality clause."

Ms. Wollin said that the settlement agreement and the brief press release issued by the board when the agreement was made public seven months ago "speak to these issues."

East Ramapo school board president Nathan Rothschild said Tuesday that his board chose Mr. Oustatcher because of his familiarity with Rockland County, having served as a high school principal in nearby Nyack and as chairman of the Rockland County legislature's board of ethics, among other ties with the district and the county.

"It was a very difficult decision, because both finalists are extremely qualified, experienced educators, and each would have made an excellent superintendent for our district," Mr. Rothschild said. "We selected Ira Oustatcher because we felt he had a slight edge over Dr. Jackson because of his close connections and familiarity with our district and with Rockland."

Asked if the controversy around Dr. Jackson's resignation and buyout agreement played any role in his board's decision, Mr. Rothschild said, "Absolutely not. Dr. Jackson was a viable candidate right up to the end, and we believe that she would make an excellent choice as superintendent here or in any district, for that matter."

Dr. Jackson said she believes that Mr. Oustatcher will do an excellent job as superintendent, and said she is grateful for being considered for the position. "I really enjoyed working with the East Ramapo board and the community," she said. "East Ramapo has great students, great faculty, great staff and a very involved and supportive board and community, so I think the district

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Dr. Jackson said she believes that Mr. Oustatcher will do an excellent job as superintendent, and said she is grateful for being considered for the position. "I really enjoyed working with the East Ramapo board and the community," she said. "East Ramapo has great students, great faculty, great staff and a very involved and supportive board and community, so I think the district has great potential and will see even more success under Ira Oustatcher."

# Firing was warranted by 'certain realities'

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life, and she is also being paid \$243,461 in salary for the current school year.

Dr. Jackson's resignation stemmed from "a certain dispute (which) has arisen between the superintendent and the board of education with regard to the superintendent's performance of her duties," according to the agreement. Although the board wanted to terminate her, Dr. Jackson claimed that there was no valid reason to break her contract, and if she was fired, she said she would pursue legal action. That, the agreement stated, would have likely resulted "in protracted and expensive litigation which would not be in the interest of either party or in the interest of the school district, its students, staff and taxpayers."

Mr. Chernis, the chair of the board's finance committee, said he believes that he, the previous seven-member board that approved the agreement with Dr. Jackson through a 6 to 1 vote, and the current board that includes one new trustee, have proved themselves to be fiscally

responsible and demonstrated a "general sensitivity" to how taxpayers' money is spent by the district. "The overall settlement figure is big and expensive, and the number has certainly been banded about," he said. "But to break down that number to what it costs each individual household in the district, it comes to about \$70 per household for one year."

In trying to decide whether to support the agreement with Dr. Jackson, Mr. Chernis said he spoke to his wife, friends and community residents, asking one question: "Would you spend \$70 if you thought it was the right thing to do for the kids and the district in the long haul?"

The "overwhelming" answer to that question, Mr. Chernis said, was "Of course I'd spend \$70." Adding that most families regularly spend \$70 on "far less important" things, Mr. Chernis said he would vote in favor of the agreement with Dr. Jackson again. "While the overall amount is a big sum of money, when you actually look at it on a per household basis and the importance of it overall to the district, I think it is money that need-

ed to be spent and I would spend it again," he said.

Ms. Wollin spoke about several "realities" the board is faced with in how Dr. Jackson's departure is being handled, including the fact that the hiring, termination and compensation of public educators and administrators is "completely different than the policies and procedures found in the business world."

The school board president said, "To be sure, there is valid frustration over the settlement agreement and its consequences. I share that frustration, and more. But as a member of the board of education, I'm faced with certain realities that are unique to this situation."

One of those realities, Ms. Wollin said, is that "the monies in the settlement agreement are substantial. I am reminded daily of that by my husband, because we too are Bedford taxpayers."

Another reality, Ms. Wollin said, is that she has taken the oath of office "to work in the best interest of the children of our district while always balancing the fiduciary responsibility

and legal obligations incumbent to serving as a trustee" on the school board.

Mr. Chernis also issued a challenge to critics of the agreement. "I know there are certain members of the community and ex-board members who will try to characterize that amount as something other than \$70 per household for whatever political reasons they have," he said. "But I invite them to come here and discuss it with me in person, rather than through The Record-Review and the ways they have been doing it."

Pointing to what he feels is mounting negativity associated within the district stemming from the tone of discussions in the community and articles in local newspapers concerning the buyout agreement, Mr. Chernis attempted to explain why he was speaking out now. "It's been a very tough couple of months for us, and something really needed to be said," Mr. Chernis said, commending Ms. Wollin for making a public statement on the issue, although he admitted their comments may be

*continued on page 15*

# Superintendent is sought by East Ramapo

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 executive session," Mr. Rothschild said. "So she was able to give us all the details."

"She's a highly qualified candidate, and from what we were able to find out about her performance and the circumstances around her agreement with the board to resign, it wasn't an obstacle to her being a strong candidate for our district superintendent position."

The East Ramapo school board was slated to make its superintendent selection on Jan. 9, but delayed the vote until Jan. 15, Mr. Rothschild said.

East Ramapo school board members visited Bedford Central schools this week as part of the superintendent search process, and met with school board member Marc Vandenhoeck, who last June cast the sole vote against entering a buyout agreement with Dr. Jackson tied to her mid-contract resignation.

Dr. Jackson submitted her resignation on June 11, although it won't take effect until this coming June 30. According to a 20-page agreement outlining some of the details of her departure, Dr. Jackson received \$650,000, compensating her for lost salary for the remaining three years of a five-year contract extension signed in 2006, as well as benefits and credited service for retirement benefits.

The deal also provides medical and dental coverage for the 52-year-old Dr. Jackson and her family for life. She is also being paid \$243,461 in salary for the current school year.

The agreement also includes a buyout of Dr. Jackson's pension, which she has accrued with the district since 1981, and the

district's contribution to the pension plan. The deal also provides for a buyout of Dr. Jackson's health insurance, which she has accrued with the district since 1981, and the



Central in 2004, Dr. Jackson served eight years as superintendent of schools in North Salem, and four years as superintendent in Ho-Ho-Kus, N.J. She has over 30 years of experience as a teacher and administrator in public schools.

Her three-year tenure leading the high school, middle school, and five elementary schools that compose Bedford Central has been marked by successes, but also at times marred by controversy.

Students at the elementary, middle and high school levels in the district have consistently performed significantly above the statewide average on assessment tests and Regents exams during Dr. Jackson's years heading Bedford Central, according to the Web site [greatschools.net](http://greatschools.net).

The district's student enrollment greatly expanded under Dr. Jackson, including a 25 percent rise at the middle school level and a more than 30 percent jump at the high school level. Major construction and renovation projects were completed or started throughout the district, including a new building at Fox Lane High School, with Dr. Jackson at the helm.

But also under Dr. Jackson's watch, a controversy occurred at Bedford Hills Elementary School stemming from allegations that a 9-year-old girl was sexually assaulted by a family friend at her home. The allegations of abuse initially surfaced in 2005 when the girl told friends at a playground that she had sex with an adult. After some of those girls discussed that claim at a slumber party soon after, one parent reportedly shared what she had heard with Victoria Graboski, then the principal at BHES.

Six educators, including Ms. Graboski, were placed on paid leave while the district investigated whether proper actions were taken to report abuse if faculty members were in fact made aware of them, as well as if measures were taken to protect the student.

Ms. Graboski was fired from her job as principal last year.

## Debra Jackson is being considered for the job of superintendent by the East Ramapo School District.

Dr. Jackson further indicates that the Bedford Central board erred in how it handled the superintendent situation.

"I know, having read some articles from newspapers local to the East Ramapo School District, that the East Ramapo board did its due diligence and investigated the facts leading up to the Bedford Central board of education agreement with Debra Jackson," Mr. Slivka said.

Mr. Slivka said their investigation, the board decided to hire Debra Jackson as superintendent.

Dr. Jackson and Ira Oustatcher, the assistant superintendent of schools in Clifton, N.J., are the two finalists for the East Ramapo job, from a pool of 30 candidates.

East Ramapo's current superintendent, Mitchell Schwartz, is slated to retire this month, but Mr. Rothschild said that Mr. Schwartz has agreed to stay on longer to facilitate a smooth transition period for

**East Ramapo school board president Nathan Rothschild said that Dr. Jackson remains in the running for the district's top job when the board selects a superintendent this week.**

# After \$1M deal, Debra Jackson lands new post

*March 7 2008*

By JOHN ROCHE

As the search for a new superintendent for the Bedford Central School District enters another phase, outgoing superintendent Dr. Debra Jackson has landed the top job at the Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery Central School District.

Dr. Jackson, whose resignation from Bedford Central takes effect this June, will begin serving as superintendent of the Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery School District in July.

She was hired Feb. 7 by the school district, which consists of two elementary schools, a middle school and a high school, serving students from the communities of Highland Falls, Fort Montgomery and West Point in Orange County, and Garrison in Putnam County.

"As I've said before, this is certainly a wonderful community here in Bedford with outstanding staff,

concerned and involved parents, and eager and dedicated students, so it's a mix of emotions I'm feeling as the time approaches to move on," Dr. Jackson said. "I'll miss the many talented individuals I've had the pleasure of working with here in Bedford Central, but I am also excited about the opportunity ahead of me as superintendent of the Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery district."

Dr. Jackson said one of the things that drew her to apply for the position at the district is its relationship with the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. "There is tremendous opportunity there to not only work with strong administrators and staff in the school district but to make connections with West Point, which is adding a preparatory school and seeks to build a stronger and expanded educational connection between

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# Highland Falls hires Debra Jackson

continued from page 1

the college and high school students in the district," she said.

Another attractive aspect of her new position is that she will be much closer to home. "The demands of a superintendent's position and the hours the job requires makes a shorter commute a very practical but welcomed factor," Dr. Jackson said.

The details of Dr. Jackson's contract could not be obtained by press time. This week, Joanne DiBlasi, the district clerk at the Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery Central School District, confirmed that Dr. Jackson was appointed by the board on Feb. 7, and that she will take the reins of the district in July. Ms. DiBlasi declined to provide any more specifics about the contract.

Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery school board president David DeLeo is out of the country this week and could not be reached for comment. Press inquiries for school board members must be cleared by the school board president, Ms. DiBlasi said.

Bedford Central school board president Susan Ellison Wollin said this week that Dr. Jackson had not yet informed the board that she had been hired, and therefore declined to comment. "The board has heard from multiple sources that Dr. Jackson has accepted a position to be the superintendent of another school district," Ms. Wollin said. However, no member of the current board has been contacted as a reference and Dr. Jackson herself has not informed us collectively that she has accepted another position. Therefore, we are unable to officially comment on the appointment."

Dr. Jackson said she remains committed to working with fellow administrators, staff, faculty and board members at Bedford Central to ensure as smooth a transition for the next superintendent as possible, as well as to be productive in her remaining four months in her current position. "We're in the budget process now, so I'm working with the district to look at ways that Bedford Central will be able to address its fiscal needs and plans, particularly in the coming year," Dr. Jackson said. "As in years past, we are working at maintaining the quality education and programs in Bedford Central, while providing fiscal responsibility to the community."

Other projects she hopes to see completed before she departs include the full launch of a redesigned district Web site, and working with administrators, faculty and staff to prepare for next year. "I want to do whatever I can to see that the new superintendent at Bedford Central can hit the ground running," Dr. Jackson said.

Bedford Central's board this week began seeking volunteers to meet with candidates for its superintendent. The search firm School Leadership LLC is assisting the Bedford Central board in the selection process for Dr. Jackson's replacement. The board expects to begin interviewing candidates for the position later this month, and appoint a new superintendent in late April or early May.

Dr. Jackson, who began as superintendent at Bedford Central in 2004, submitted her resignation last

June 11, although it won't take effect until this coming June 30. According to a 20-page agreement outlining some of the details of her departure, Dr. Jackson received \$650,000, compensating her for lost salary for the remaining three years of a five-year contract extension signed in 2006, as well as benefits and credited service for retirement benefits.

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The agreement stated that although the board wanted to terminate her, Dr. Jackson claimed that there was no valid reason to break her contract, and if she was fired, she would pursue legal action. That, the agreement stated, would have likely resulted "in protracted and expensive litigation which would not be in the interest of either party or in the interest of the school district, its students, staff and taxpayers."

Before taking the helm in Bedford Central, Dr. Jackson served eight years as superintendent of schools in North Salem, and four years as superintendent in Ho-Ho-Kus, N.J. She has over 31 years of experience as a teacher and administrator in public schools.

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But also under Dr. Jackson's watch, a controversy occurred at Bedford Hills Elementary School (BHES) stemming from allegations that a 9-year-old girl had been sexually assaulted by a family friend at her home. The allegations of abuse initially surfaced in 2005 when the girl told friends at a playground that she had had sex with an adult. After some of those girls discussed that claim at a slumber party soon after, one parent reportedly shared what she heard with Victoria Graboski, then the principal at BHES.

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## Volunteer for superintendent search

The board of education of the Bedford Central School District

March 19. Those who wish to submit a card for possible selection

met with the finalist following a period this fall in

# Volunteer for superintendent search

The board of education of the Bedford Central School District announced this week that it was seeking volunteers from the school community to meet with the finalist(s) candidates for the position of superintendent of schools. Volunteers being requested include one current parent from each of the district's five elementary schools, two current parents from each of Fox Lane Middle School and Fox Lane High School, and three community residents who do not currently have any children in the district's schools. The 12 volunteers will be selected by lot at the board of education meeting scheduled for

March 19. Those who wish to submit a card for possible selection should obtain the volunteer card from the district clerk, Carole LaColla, at 241-6011 or by e-mail at clacolla177@bcsdny.org and return it to no later than 5 p.m. March 18.

The volunteers selected for this task will have to participate in two meetings: one with the search consultant and the board's legal counsel to go over protocols for the meeting with the finalist, and then the meeting itself. Two representatives selected by the volunteer committee will then be asked to meet with the board of education to debrief on the com-

mittee's meeting with the finalist.

Following a period this fall in which staff, students and community were asked to provide input on the qualifications which should be sought in the new superintendent, the position has been advertised both regionally and nationally by Search Leadership LLC, the New York City-based search firm which is assisting the board of education in its search. The board will begin interviewing candidates for the superintendent beginning on March 17. It is anticipated that the appointment of the superintendent will take place in late April or early May.

Ms. Graboski was fired from her job as principal, but later rehired by the district as a special education teacher at Fox Lane High School. While some of the teachers were reassigned within the district in the wake of the investigation, two of the educators resigned from their positions.

This fall, Dr. Jackson was among the two finalists for the superintendent position in the East Ramapo Central School District, but that job ultimately went to the other candidate.

Former Bedford Central school board president Mark Slivka said Dr. Jackson should prove to be an asset to her new district. "Debra Jackson has an excellent set of skills and a wealth of experience as an educator, so I think she will have a tremendously positive impact as superintendent of the Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery School District," Mr. Slivka said.

March 21 2008

# Details of Debra Jackson's new contract are revealed

By JOHN ROCHE

As the Bedford Central School District this week announced the semi-finalists in its superintendent search, details emerged regarding Dr. Debra Jackson's hiring to head the Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery Central School District.

Dr. Jackson, whose resignation from Bedford Central takes effect this June, was hired Feb. 7 by the Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery school district, which consists of two elementary schools, a middle school and a high school, serving students from the communities of Highland Falls, Fort Montgomery and West Point in Orange County, and Garrison in Putnam County.

According to Dr. Jackson's new contract, which was obtained this week by The Record-Review via the

New York State Freedom of Information Law (FOIL), she will be paid \$160,000 for the first year of a three-year contract.

Dr. Jackson's salary from July 1, 2009, to June 30, 2011, will be determined annually by the Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery school board based on an evaluation of her performance as superintendent. Her salary cannot be reduced from the previous year's pay rate, according to the 10-page contract.

The board must notify Dr. Jackson on or before June 30, 2009, whether the district intends to extend her employment an additional two years or allow her contract to expire in 2011, according to the contract. For each subsequent year, the board must notify Dr. Jackson if she'll be retained

*continued on page 15*

# Superintendent's Highland Falls contract are revealed

ed a lump sum of \$160,000 in 1991 in salary Dr. Jackson's resignation stemmed from "a certain dispute (which) has arisen between the superintendent and the board of education with regard to

listed for Bedford Central's next superintendent is listed as \$200,000, plus regionally competitive benefits. Dr. Jackson, the previous school board and current Bedford Central board members have repeatedly declined to comment on the specifics of her resignation or the settlement agreement, citing a confidentiality clause in it.

According to the agreement, Dr. Jackson's resignation stemmed from "a certain dispute (which) has arisen between the superintendent and the board of education with regard to

the superintendent's performance of her duties." Nearly two pages of Dr. Jackson's contract with Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery outlines disciplinary procedures regarding the board's evaluation of her job performance. In addition to several provisions outlining procedures for charges, disciplinary hearings and other actions, the contract states that during the term of the contract, "the superintendent shall be subject to discharge for good and just cause, as provided for in the Education Law of the State

of New York, provided that the board of education does not arbitrarily or capriciously call for her dismissal." Also stipulated in the contract is that the Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery board will devote a portion of one meeting in April or May of each year to an evaluation of Dr. Jackson's job performance and her working relationship with the board. That annual evaluation, to be conducted in executive session, would be based on performance criteria established by board members and Dr. Jackson by Oct. 1 of

each year. In a previous interview, Dr. Jackson pointed to the wealth of educational opportunities her new position offers. Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery school board president David DeLeo has not yet responded to repeated requests for comment regarding Dr. Jackson's hiring, but "welcomed Dr. Jackson to the district and commented that he believes she will be a great leader," in minutes from the meeting she was hired posted on the district's Web site.

# Board members say settlement justified

By JOHN ROCHE

With a second budget vote looming, three members of the Bedford Central board of education spoke out on a broad range of issues last week, including the controversial settlement agreement reached with outgoing superintendent Dr. Debra Jackson.

School board president Susan Elion, along with fellow board members Barbara Grossman and Mark Chernis discussed the trimmed-down \$116.6 million budget set to go before taxpayers this Tuesday, as well as lasting repercussions from the board's handling of Dr. Jackson's \$1 million severance and the board's plans on how to proceed in leading the district whether the retooled spending plan passes or not on.

Bedford residents voted down a \$117.2 million budget for 2008-09 by a slim margin on May 20, with a 42-

vote difference forcing the board to either agree to a contingency budget or retool the spending plan and put it to voters again. The board decided to seek approval for a second budget, cutting \$558,000 from what was initially proposed, rather than agree to a \$115.2 million contingency budget.

Voting is set for June 17.

Although all three board members who met with *The Record-Review* on June 4 said they believe the buyout agreement with Dr. Jackson played a significant role in defeating the budget last month, each said they would take the same course of action again.

"The purpose of the settlement agreement on the part of the board was not concealment, but rather to serve the best interest of the district in the least expensive way possible,"

Mr. Chernis said. "Even knowing

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what I know today about how some people in the community feel about it, I think the separation with Dr. Jackson was what was best for the district, and the settlement reached was the most cost-effective way to make that separation possible."

Citing a confidentiality clause in the agreement reached with Dr. Jackson, the superintendent and board members have repeatedly declined to comment specifically on what led to her resignation last spring, which will take effect at the end of this month.

Dr. Jackson was hired earlier this spring as superintendent of the Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery Central School District, and is slated to begin that job this summer. Last week, Bedford Central hired a new superintendent, Dr. Jere Hochman, who will take the reins of the district on July 1.

In the wake of voters shooting down the budget last month, and at times throughout the past year, the board has acknowledged the community's frustration with the fact that Dr. Jackson was paid a considerable settlement without the reason behind it being made public. But last week Ms. Grossman and Ms. Wollin pointed out that given Dr. Jackson's contract and education laws, the board would likely not have been able to discuss the reason behind the superintendent's resignation whether a settlement was reached or not.

"Regardless of how we came to closure with the outgoing superintendent, stipulations in her contract and restrictions within education law would have precluded us from speaking about the specifics," Ms. Wollin said. "I still believe that the board acted in the best interest of the district, although we've clearly heard the community's displeasure with the way things took shape."

In an effort to boost community involvement in the district, Ms. Wollin said the board will implement an advisory committee composed of parents and other residents of the district. "We want to tap into the ideas, opinions and suggestions as well as the unique talents, experience and expertise of individuals in our community to improve the district and how it operates this coming year and for the future," said Ms. Wollin. "It's easier to point out what may have been done wrong in the past than to come up with real solutions, which is always our goal. We want to have holistic conversations and ongoing communication with the community about the annual budget process, about our district's educational values and achievements, about contract negotiations with our teachers and other staff and many other topics and issues, and an advisory committee along with the leadership of our new superintendent should be positive steps toward those goals for short-term and long-term planning."

The board will also introduce other measures, such as establishing an ongoing performance appraisal process for the superintendent and other administrators and holding development workshops for the board with Dr. Hochman, to improve the level of governance throughout the district, the board president said.

As for the proposed budget, board members said they believe voters will be considering a spending plan at the polls on Tuesday that is both responsible and responsive to the district and taxpayers.

"The reason we did not make more cuts in the initial budget and the one proposed now is that this community does not want larger class sizes, and they've been very clear about that," said Mr. Chernis, the chair of the board's finance committee. "The community has also been very vocal in recently enacting a particular this year that they don't want special programs such as the gifted program and music and art programs cut. I think this budget responds to what the community wants."

Despite the district's fiscal challenges, Dr. Hochman said he is confident that the board will be able to reach a responsible budget for the coming year.

Chernis said he is confident that the board will be able to reach a responsible budget for the coming year.

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# Jackson passes baton to her successor

June 27 2008

By JOHN ROCHE

Bedford Central School District's outgoing superintendent Dr. Debra Jackson voiced confidence in her successor last week, saying Dr. Jere Hochman's track record throughout his 30 years in education make him well suited to lead the district.

"I've known Jere Hochman since I first became superintendent at Bedford Central, and I respect his commitment to education and his vision and leadership as an educator," Dr. Jackson said. "I think he's an excellent choice to lead the district, and I believe he'll build tremendously on the successes of Bedford Central."

Dr. Jackson, whose last day at Bedford Central is June 30, said Dr. Hochman has a solid reputation as a visionary leader who emphasizes educational excellence. "Jere Hochman brings with him a proven record of

bringing people in a school community together for the common goal of providing the best education for students, and I expect he'll do a fantastic job as superintendent here," said Dr. Jackson.

Dr. Hochman, 56, currently serves as superintendent of the Amherst-Pelham Regional Schools, which educates over 4,000 students in five elementary schools, a middle school and a high school in western Massachusetts. He is set to begin as Bedford Central's superintendent on July 1.

Following a seven-month search, Dr. Hochman was tapped from a pool of six semifinalists after the board whittled down possible candidates from 49 educators who applied for Bedford Central's top administrative spot.

Dr. Jackson, who was on vacation  
*continued on page 38*

# Dr. Hochman to take school district helm

*continued from page 1*

when her successor was formally introduced to the Bedford Central community earlier this month, said she will do all she can to ensure a smooth transition for Dr. Hochman and the district. "I look forward to speaking to Jere Hochman about his goals, plans and vision for the district, and would certainly help him and the district in any way I can to make the coming months a seamless transition," Dr. Jackson said.

Dr. Hochman will take the helm of Bedford Central at a challenging time, now that the district will operate on a contingency budget since voters shot down a scaled-down budget this week, as well as other repercussions in the district and community stemming from how the separation agreement with his predecessor was handled.

Dr. Jackson submitted her resignation last spring because of a dispute with the Bedford Central school board at the time. Although she was given a \$650,000 payout and medical benefits for life, the exact nature

of the dispute was not publicly disclosed due to a confidentiality clause in a controversial separation agreement reached between the district and Dr. Jackson.

Starting as superintendent of Bedford Central in 2004, Dr. Jackson was given a five-year contract extension signed in 2006. Next month she will begin serving as superintendent of the Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery School District, which consists of two elementary schools, a middle school and a high school, serving students from the communities of Highland Falls, Fort Montgomery and West Point in Orange County, and Garrison in Putnam County.

Dr. Hochman, who this month was given a three-year contract to lead Bedford Central at a starting annual salary of \$245,000, said he plans to establish a more open dialogue within the district and with the community, as well as stressing absolute transparency, focusing on process and fostering a collaborative spirit to boost the district.



# Dear Dr. Debra Jackson: Please don't show up

June 27 2008

By JOHN ROCHE

There will be plenty of pomp and circumstance today at Fox Lane's high school graduation and middle school moving-up ceremony, but there won't be any remarks by Bedford Central School District's outgoing superintendent Dr. Debra Jackson.

Dr. Jackson, whose resignation under a controversial agreement with the district's board of education takes effect on June 30, was directed in writing this week not to attend either commencement ceremony.

"I'm disappointed by the board's decision and their request that I not attend the high school and middle school graduations, since I was looking forward to personally congratulating the students on their achievements and wishing them the best as they move forward," Dr. Jackson said. "Although I'll certainly comply with the board's decision, I want the graduates and their families to know

that I would never choose not to be there to support them."

Dr. Jackson, who will depart the district at month's end after serving as superintendent since July 2004, had planned to address graduates at the Fox Lane Middle School moving-up ceremony on Thursday, June 26, and the high school's commencement on Friday, June 27.

She said she was initially asked by the board to make her remarks at the ceremonies shorter than in previous years, and was then directed by letter from the board on Friday not to attend either graduation at all.

School board president Susan Elion Wollin said the board felt it prudent that Dr. Jackson refrain from taking part in the middle school's moving-up ceremony and the high school's graduation.

"The board of education takes great pride in the achievements of

*continued on page 38*

# Dr. Jackson asked to avoid grad ceremonies

continued from page 1

the class of 2008 and firmly believes that the focus of graduation should rightfully be about the successes and accomplishments of our students," Ms. Wollin said in an e-mailed statement on behalf of the seven-member board.

"The high school graduation ceremony and the middle school milestones are important really belong to and should be about the graduating students, their proud families and the future," Ms. Wollin said in the statement. "The board has chosen to move forward in a positive manner and looks forward to the upcoming school year under the dynamic and vibrant leadership of Dr. Jere Hochman, the new superintendent effective July 1."

Controversy has swirled around what led to Dr. Jackson submitting her resignation last spring, as well as about the settlement agreement she reached with the board last June that included a lump sum payment of \$650,000, compensating her for lost salary for the remaining three years of a five-year contract extension signed in 2006, as well as benefits and cred-

ited service for retirement benefits. She was also paid \$243,461 in salary through the end of the current academic year, when her resignation will take effect.

Citing a confidentiality clause in the agreement reached with Dr. Jackson, both she and board members have refused to comment on what specifically led to her resignation, which, the agreement states, stemmed from "a certain dispute" between Dr. Jackson and the board regarding the superintendent's job performance.

Attempts by The Record-Review to ascertain the specifics of that dispute under the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) process were unsuccessful.

The board's handling of the superintendent situation and frustration surrounding the confidentiality aspect of the costly buyout are believed to have played at least some role in taxpayers voting down two proposed budgets for the district this spring.

Earlier this year, Dr. Jackson was hired as superintendent of the Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery Central School District, and will take the helm of that district serving students from Highland Falls, Fort Montgom-

ery and West Point in Orange County, and Garrison in Putnam County in early July.

Until she received the letter from the board on Tuesday instructing her not to attend the two graduations, Dr. Jackson said she planned to take part in each ceremony, and to extend best wishes to graduates of the middle and high school both publicly and privately.

"As I have every year that I've been at Bedford Central and as is customary in this district and in other districts, I planned on addressing graduates and their families as part of this week's ceremonies," Dr. Jackson said. "I really believe that whatever occurred with my status and with the board should not have an impact on students, and I hope this is no way puts a damper on the graduations. I do want the students to know, however, that I wanted to be with them as they celebrated their achievements, and to wish them all the best in the bright futures they have ahead of them."

Dr. Jackson said that despite being uninvited to the two ceremonies, she remains willing to help facilitate the transition as Dr. Hochman, se-

lected after a seven-month national search, takes the reins of Bedford Central. "As I've said all along, I will do all I can to ensure that there is a smooth transition, and I wish nothing but the best for the district and Jere Hochman," Dr. Jackson said. "I believe that Bedford Central is a wonderful district with dedicated faculty and staff and a wonderfully supportive community. Although I'm disappointed with the board's decision and disagree with it, that can't and won't change my opinion of Bedford Central and my fond memories of this district as a great place for learning."

Dr. Jackson said her message at both graduations would have been simple and heartfelt. "I really wish I had the opportunity to tell the students how proud of them I am, and I would have liked to encourage them to continue learning and to always build on their experiences," she said. "I would have also urged them to appreciate the contributions and support they received from their families, and stressed that they have accomplished a great deal, and will have lots to give back to the world in the future."

July 18 2008

# District critics take their case to the Internet

By JOHN ROCHE

The creator of a new Web site to foster discussion — and action — by Bedford residents on community issues is leading by example.

Camillo Santomero, who launched and operates BedfordTownMeeting.com and served on the Bedford Central school board in the 1990s, said he's demonstrating his commitment to action through his ongoing attempt to find out what's behind the controversial, confidential separation agreement between the Bedford school board and the district's former superintendent, Dr. Debra Jackson.

"I created BedfordTownMeeting.com as a fact-based, online forum to promote the open exchange of ideas about what is affecting our town," said Mr. Santomero, a resident of Bedford. "But personally, I feel while there is certainly a time and place for discussion, there are also times, issues and situations that call for action. And the

district's handling of the Dr. Jackson settlement using taxpayers' money is something I'm willing to act on, and follow through with."

Just as The Record-Review and The Journal News did last year, Mr. Santomero requested, under the New York State Freedom of Information Law (FOIL), all documents from the Bedford Central School District regarding the separation agreement and buyout package reached between Dr. Jackson and the school board in June 2007.

Dr. Jackson submitted her resignation last spring, although it did not take effect until last month. According to a 20-page agreement outlining some of the details of her departure, Dr. Jackson received \$650,000, compensating her for lost salary for the remaining three years of a five-year contract extension signed in 2006, as well as benefits and credited service

*continued on page 15*

# District critics take their case to the Web

continued from page 1

for retirement benefits. The deal also provides medical and dental coverage for Dr. Jackson and her family for life, and she was paid \$243,461 in salary for the 2007-08 school year.

According to the agreement, Dr. Jackson's resignation stemmed from "a certain dispute (which) has arisen between the superintendent and the board of education with regard to the superintendent's performance of her duties." Citing a confidentiality clause in the agreement, Dr. Jackson and members of the school board have refused to discuss the dispute that led to her departure.

Mr. Santomero's FOIL request was denied last week by the district, on grounds that it would violate Dr. Jackson's confidentiality rights as a district employee and "most likely subject the district to significant litigation." This basis for denial of Mr. Santomero's request are similar to the one given last year in denying The Record-Review's FOIL request and appeal.

"For whatever reason, when those previous FOIL requests about the Dr. Jackson settlement were denied, they weren't pursued any further," Mr. Santomero said. "That won't be the case with the FOIL request I've made. I will appeal a denial, and if need be, take further action. I will, because I and many other residents of the district strongly believe that we as taxpayers have the right to know what happened, and I and others feel that transparency is essential for a school district in a situation such as this. I'm not trying to be adversarial, but I think this is important, and I'm willing to pursue this however much time, money or effort it may take."

*'People are just excited that there is a forum to gain information and then state their opinion, and then get some response.'*

— CAMILLO SANTOMERO

Mr. Santomero said he created BedfordTownMeeting.com because of his concerns about the board's judgment and actions involving the Dr. Jackson issue, as well as what he and others believe has been a serious lack of transparency in the Bedford Central School District.

He publicly campaigned for defeat of the district's proposed 2008-2009 budget, which voters did twice, once in mid-May and again in June. Mr. Santomero and other critics of the budget have maintained that a pattern of steadily increasing school taxes negatively affects the community and called for greater transparency in the school district as well as systematic changes in the way the school budget is drawn up year to year.

"As I was looking at this year's school budget process, I really saw the need for greater transparency on the part of the district's school board and administration, as well as a centralized point where people could go to get accurate, factual information as well as to share their thoughts and opinions or to raise questions they might have," Mr. Santomero said. "That really was how BedfordTownMeeting.com came to be."

The response from the community has been positive, according to Mr. Santomero. "People are just excited that there is a forum to gain informa-

tion and then state their opinion, and then get some response," he said. "In some cases, they've gotten many responses, and then they've responded back themselves. That's great."

Describing himself as a novice in Web site design and implementation, Mr. Santomero said he would nonetheless like to see BedfordTownMeeting.com grow. "I'd certainly like to see its scope broaden and to extend the reach of the site to include all areas of the town and the various levels of government," he said. "While the genesis of BedfordTownMeeting.com was concerns relating to the school district and the board of education, I would hope that people will use it to exchange fact-based information relating to town government, including the town board and Bedford's commissions and panels. I'd like to see it become what I intended it to be, and that's an open forum for information, ideas and opinions about what residents see as important and relevant to our town."

Mr. Santomero said although he personally feels strongly about many local issues, he doesn't believe that BedfordTownMeeting.com is, or should, advocate any particular position. He pointed to the fact that he invited members of the Bedford school board to submit an article on their proposed budget before the votes to post

on the Web site. The board declined his invitation, Mr. Santomero said, but he still hopes the school district and board will participate in future exchanges on BedfordTownMeeting.com.

"The goal is to get as much publicly available information out to town residents so that they can view that information and make informed decisions, whatever the issue may be," he said. "I don't want to tell people what to do, how to think, how to act or how to vote. I do believe however, that it's important for people to make informed decisions, and given access to information, people will formulate their own informed decisions based on facts."

Bedford Village resident Scott Vallar, who joined Mr. Santomero in lobbying against the proposed school budgets, said he believes BedfordTownMeeting.com is filling a void in the town.

"I think the Web site is doing what Camillo intended it to do, and that's to serve as an online meeting place for town residents," Mr. Vallar said. "I see it as an excellent central location for residents of our community to go to for information on topics of interest in a non-partisan, objective format, and it also serves as a forum for anyone to express their opinion. That's something that didn't exist, and I think it will make Bedford a better place if it can provide that."

Mr. Santomero said he welcomes feedback on the site itself. "I'm open to suggestions as to how the site could better serve its purpose and meet the needs of the community," he said. "I'd like to hear what people think of it, and what directions they'd like to see it take."

November 21, 2008

# Lawsuit seeks answers to Debra Jackson deal

By JOHN ROCHE

When it comes to finding out precisely what led to the departure of Dr. Debra Jackson as superintendent of the Bedford Central School District, an action saddled with a costly and controversial buyout package, one district resident won't take no for an answer.

Camillo Santomero, a former school board member, recently launched legal action against Bedford Central, filing an Article 78 proceeding to appeal the district's refusal to provide all documents pertaining to a "certain dispute" that occurred at some point in 2007 between Dr. Jackson and the Bedford Central school board.

The district has yet to receive Mr. Santomero's petition, according to Bedford Central's new superintendent, Dr. Jere Hochman. "We have not

received any notification on this filing, so I can't comment on something I haven't seen or read," Dr. Hochman said. "If such a filing has occurred, we will certainly cooperate with the court to ensure that a fair judgment can be determined."

That dispute led to a written agreement between the board and Dr. Jackson, resulting in her resignation, along with a buyout package that included a lump sum payment of \$650,000 and medical benefits for her and her family for life.

Mr. Santomero declined to comment on the lawsuit on Wednesday, citing the advice of his attorney, Robert Sternbach. But this summer, even after Dr. Jackson's resignation took effect in June, Mr. Santomero vowed to pursue public disclosure of the docu-

*continued on page 18*

# RESIDENT FILES COURT CHALLENGE TO JACKSON'S PRIVACY

*continued from page 1*

ments outlining the reasons behind her departure and what led to the confidential settlement agreement. Citing a confidentiality clause in the agreement, Dr. Jackson and board members have repeatedly refused to comment on what specifically led to her resignation, other than to refer to the "certain dispute" regarding her job performance.

This spring, Mr. Santomero filed a request under the New York State Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) asking the district for all documents regarding the dispute, the exact nature of which has never been publicly disclosed because of a confidentiality clause in the separation agreement.

The Record-Review and The Journal News filed similar FOIL requests soon after the agreement between the school board and Dr. Jackson was announced. All three FOIL requests were denied. This, in turn, led to the challenge by the district.

In this request, on the other hand, Mr. Santomero filed a 52-page petition in Westchester County

Supreme Court, which charges that the district's refusal to release the requested documents was "arbitrary, capricious and constitutes an abuse of discretion."

The filing, which names the school board, its president, Susan Elion Wollin, district clerk Carole LaColla and Dr. Jackson as respondents, calls for the release of the documents requested, stating that "the board must not be permitted to avoid disclosure of the basis for the extraordinary settlement it reached with Dr. Jackson, a matter of compelling interest."

Mr. Santomero's petition claims the district's refusal to release the documents is "arbitrary and capricious" and "constitutes an abuse of discretion." He also claims that the district's refusal to release the documents is "non-final or policy determinations" and therefore exempt. "To the contrary, they are unquestionably final," Mr. Santomero's petition states.

ments would result in an unwarranted invasion of privacy. The dispute "encompasses facts and circumstances that go well beyond the mere personal privacy interests of Dr. Jackson," the petition states, and "implicates public policy considerations involving expenditure of substantial taxpayer funds."

The petition further claims that the board failed to demonstrate that the requested documents are "intra-agency material" and therefore exempt from public disclosure. Public Officers Law exempts disclosure only of documents containing unproved allegations, according to the petition, which doesn't apply to Jackson's case.

The petition also challenges Bedford Central's claim that the documents are "non-final or policy determinations" and therefore exempt. "To the contrary, they are unquestionably final," Mr. Santomero's petition states.

## *The petition also challenges the board's claim that releasing the documents would result in an unwarranted invasion of privacy.*

In asking for the court to intercede and demand that the district comply with Mr. Santomero's FOIL request, the petition concludes that the school community and "taxpayers are entitled to information from which they might learn the basis for the Settlement Agreement's extraordinary terms and decide themselves whether they were justified, or whether other considerations, having nothing to do with an unwarranted invasion of Dr. Jackson's privacy, were the motivation."

In July, Dr. Jackson began as superintendent of the Highland Falls-Fort Montgomery School District, serving students from the communities of Highland Falls, Fort Montgomery and West Point in Orange County, and Garrison in Putnam County. That same month, Dr. Hochman, who previously served as a superintendent of schools in western Massachusetts, took the helm as Bedford Central's top administrator.

In addition to the release of the documents requested through his FOIL, Mr. Santomero is seeking attorney's fees and other costs incurred by the litigation from the district.