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Bedford Central's truth commission

It may be a bit akin to Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy going after the flesh of George W. Bush via the "truth commission." But long after the players have moved on, the Bedford Central superintendent settlement continues with a life of its own. The issue is one that crosses the lines of school districts — "What happened that they paid the superintendent a million dollars to leave?" an incredulous Katonah mom asked us the other day. You don't have to be a Bedford Central resident to want to know.

The legal tangle stems from a dispute between the Bedford Central school board and then superintendent Debra Jackson. Their conflict led to a written agreement between the board and Dr. Jackson that resulted in her resignation, her departure from the district in June 2008, and a buyout package that included a lump-sum payment of \$650,000 and medical benefits for her and her family for life.

Residents and onlookers have probably reconciled themselves with the fact that \$1 million of taxpayer money is out the window — or more accurately, in Dr. Jackson's bank account. What they haven't reconciled themselves with is that the cause or causes that led to the settlement are no more clear than they were when the settlement was first announced.

While most of us do not have the energy or resources to follow up on this, one Bedford resident, Camillo Santomero, is calling the district to account in the courts. Based on his own years as a member of the school board and given the nature of the "truly extraordinary" agreement reached between the Bedford Central school board and former superintendent Dr. Debra Jackson, Mr. Santomero has said he finds it hard to believe that only two documents exist relating to the controversial departure of Dr. Jackson.

In a court filing this week, Mr. Santomero, who is pursuing legal action against the district over its failure to publicly disclose the exact reasons behind the settlement agreement, and his attorney also argued that Bedford Central officials have failed to prove why documents related to Dr. Jackson's departure are exempt from being disclosed under the New York State Freedom of Information Law (FOIL).

"The public is entitled to an explanation for this settlement with a public officer that will result in the expenditure of \$1 million in taxpayer funds," his lawyer, Robert Sternbach, said in the recently filed reply.

Bedford Central's defense of the FOIL denial is based on the position that since Dr. Jackson reached an agreement with the board before any disciplinary charges against her could be formally filed, the exact nature of any of those charges, and the resulting dispute over them, are not covered by what must be released under FOIL.

Our position echoes Mr. Santomero's. While we recognize that there may be matters of confidentiality or that are limited as a result of privacy provisions of an employment contract, this needs to be recognized by an independent third party such as an arbitrator or judge. How this decision came about — i.e., the decision to proceed with a settlement rather than risk legal hazard — should also be demonstrated.

So far, we are impressed by the work, the vision and the enthusiasm of Dr. Jere Hochman. This is not about him. In the words of someone else in government, "We inherited this mess."

Yes, we are in difficult economic times, and the hardships will only mount for school districts. For that reason, it is time to shed the ghosts in the closet that hover over budget votes and district decisions. There are ways that the Bedford Central public can be enlightened without surrendering Dr. Jackson, and the district's, legally protected rights.