

Sunrise charter school mass-fires teachers

Other teachers resign after sudden salary, benefit cuts

By Bob Norman - Investigative Reporter

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SUNRISE, Fla. - It was about a month into the school year that Joshua Brooks' five young children, who attend the new Paramount Charter School in Sunrise, told him the news.

"I just picked them up one day and all their teachers were gone," Brooks said, still incredulous. "I'm looking around like, 'OK, where's your teacher? Where's your teacher?' Nobody had a teacher."

Leonie Lewis said her 7-year-old daughter, in tears, told her the same news and said she had drawn pictures all day instead of doing school work.

"She lost her teacher, she came home, she cried," Lewis said. "She tells me she wants things to go back to the way they used to be when they had teachers instead of substitutes, because they are not doing anything. They're not learning anything."

Brooks and Lewis both said they could get no answers from the school, a new privately owned charter school approved by the Broward County school board that has already received \$740,000 in state taxpayer funding. Three now-former Paramount teachers who, fearing retaliation, spoke on condition of anonymity said about 20 teachers lost their jobs, many in a mass firing, the others resigning.

"One by one, she would call everybody in and they were getting fired, fired, fired," one teacher said.

The woman firing the teachers was Maia Williams, an administrator at the school and sister of the school's owner, Kimika Williams Mason. One teacher who was fired said Williams told her it was because students were being bullied at the school, though she said she had not witnessed any of it.

Broward County school board member Laurie Levinson Rich, who was apprised of the situation, said she learned it was due to the departure of a principal.

Many who weren't fired resigned. One said that after the mass firings, she was called into the room and told that the school wanted to keep her, but that if she wanted to keep her job she would have to take a cut in pay from \$36,000 to \$30,000 and that promised benefits, including health care, would be cut.

"It made me feel awful like, 'How dare you play God with peoples' lives like this,'" one of the teachers who resigned said.

All three teachers who spoke with Local 10 News said the school was in disarray even before the mass exodus, with little structure and much confusion.

"Everything that was supposed to happen was never happening," one teacher said.

"There's no discipline policy. There's no schedule. I didn't even get the names of my students," another teacher said.

"We had no computers for the kids. I had one lock on one door. I couldn't lock the door from the inside," another teacher said. "Sometimes I had third-graders with second-graders. I never really knew who was coming to my class. There was no discipline matrix. I had like no supplies."

After a Local 10 News interview, Lewis took her daughter out of Paramount in favor of a public school.

"I feel very misled. I feel like it was a bait-and-switch type," she said. "They told me all types of great things that the school was going to be doing, and they fell through on everything."

"I figured, OK, a charter school, it will be nice and easy," Brooks said. "But I got the exact opposite."

Tuesday night, Local 10 investigative reporter Bob Norman has a wild encounter with a school administrator and digs into the ownership of the troubled school.

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