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Tapes of School Officials: Ante Becomes 'Little Higher'

LEAD: These are excerpts from conversations taped by Colman Genn, superintendent of School District 27 in Queens, with James C. Sullivan, the school board treasurer, Samuel Granirer, board vice president, and William Sampol, a former Republican state legislative aide seeking a \$42,000-a-year district job, and others over a course of seven months.

These are excerpts from conversations taped by Colman Genn, superintendent of School District 27 in Queens, with James C. Sullivan, the school board treasurer, Samuel Granirer, board vice president, and William Sampol, a former Republican state legislative aide seeking a \$42,000-a-year district job, and others over a course of seven months. The opening excerpts are from a conversation that generally revolved around Mr. Sullivan's and Mr. Granirer's complaints that Mr. Genn had hired too many black assistant principals and not enough of the people they wanted. Feb. 6, 1989

GENN: Jimmy, you're not going to take all the blacks off the list because . . .

SULLIVAN: Yes. If you're gonna put them in, we're gonna take them out. Yeah. If there was movement to play, I'd play. You know what I mean? [A few minutes later.]

SULLIVAN: And a year from now, your contract is going to be up. And I'm telling you this, as your friend. As board members who'll probably be sitting here.

GENN: I'm sure you will all be sitting here.

SULLIVAN: O.K. Do you understand what the considerations become then? And how the ante becomes, becomes a little higher under those new guidelines?

GENN: I understand, but I can't let that become.

GRANIRER: [Unintelligible.]

GENN: How I run my life . . .

SULLIVAN: I understand that. But you understand what our concerns are.

GENN: I understand that I would not get another contract.

SULLIVAN: It's possible. Sept. 13, 1989

SULLIVAN: You know, nobody's looking to fleece anybody. Honestly we're not, Cole.

GENN: Yeah, I understand.

SULLIVAN: If I thought, if I thought that they were really hurting instruction, wanting a whole [expletive] piece that would make a big, major difference, I wouldn't go for it. Honestly, at the end of the day, I'm a political leader - that's why I'm here.

GENN: Yeah.

SULLIVAN: And I make sure my people get [expletive] jobs. When I came into this district, and it's true, Cole, there were three Irish supervisors out of 157 people. Now, when the blacks come up, they say, "Well, don't tell us that there aren't enough blacks that are qualified." That's true.

GENN: Mmm-hmm.

SULLIVAN: But don't expect me to believe that about my own people either.

GENN: Mmm-hmm.

SULLIVAN: Except that the avenues were never there for them to participate, because Marvin [Aaron, former district superintendent] hired out of the synagogue. That's between you and I." Sept. 18, 1989

GENN: You left a resume with Tony [an unidentified district worker] .

SAMPOL: Yes, I did.

GENN: O.K., you brought him the resume. The resume that you brought him is, really doesn't focus at any education kinds of activities.

SAMPOL: O.K.

GENN: Umm, and it's my understanding that, according to Jimmy [Sullivan] , that he wants me to tailor it, the job description, umm, to meet you skills and your background.

SAMPOL: O.K. Or I can change my resume around a little if you like. What, whatever.

GENN: Yeah. I think I'll . . . if you could get me a current resume.

SAMPOL: O.K.

GENN: And focus on the educational things that you've done.

SAMPOL: O.K.

GENN: Umm, and deal with those kinds of issues, umm. I can then either sit with you or umm, you know, work it out with you.

SAMPOL: O.K.

October 25, 1989

Tapes Show Pair Sought Control Of Queens School District Hiring

By JOSEPH BERGER

LEAD: While a new batch of secretly recorded tapes deepened a picture of school boards run as patronage factories, Chancellor Bernard Mecklowitz yesterday suspended a nine-member board in Queens, saying some board members made appointments in their district that were based on "political agendas."

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The suspension of the District 27 board in southwest Queens came as a new tape recording revealed that one board member and his campaign manager sought eventually to control all hiring in the district.

"Let's take the whole store for years," the campaign manager, Richard Lipkowitz, is heard telling Colman Genn, the district superintendent, who recorded the telephone conversation 11 days ago. "But let's do it slowly, like gentlemen, and quietly."

Mr. Lipkowitz, a gym teacher at Public School 90 in the district, ran the campaign of Salvatore Stazzone, who is heard on another tape admitting that the board was running a "dirty district" in which merit was not the prime consideration in hiring.

Mr. Stazzone's and Mr. Lipkowitz's plans to take over hiring included the positioning of allies in key positions in the superintendent's office who would ratify their choices for jobs and stand up to a troublesome coalition of parents associations. The tapes indicate Mr. Lipkowitz was to be reassigned to the district office and act as a patronage dispenser.

Mr. Mecklowitz said the tapes played Monday and yesterday before the panel, the Joint Commission on Integrity in the Public Schools, also known as the Gill Commission, disclose improper and "possibly criminal conduct" on the part of board members as they tried to "circumvent established personnel policies."

The District 27 board is the fourth community school board in New York City to be suspended in the last three years. Four District 27 board members said they had urged Mr. Mecklowitz at a meeting yesterday not to suspend the entire board because not all its members were involved in the allegations of patronage.

"I was aware of rumors but nothing definite," said one board member, Colleen A. Edmondson.

The disclosures yesterday at the commission's hearing in lower Manhattan again pointed up the potential for political maneuvering in all of New York City's 32 districts, which were created by the 1969 school decentralization law. Since 1969, elementary and junior high schools have been run by boards of nine elected officials each while the central Board of Education dominates only the high schools. A 'Political Leader'

On tapes played Monday, one board member, James C. Sullivan, was heard saying he was a "political leader" whose duty was "to make sure my people" get jobs, then producing a list of 11 paraprofessionals and teaching aides he wanted school officials to hire. He also complained that too many blacks and Jews were being hired.

Yesterday's hearing, at which tapes of nine more conversations were played, was also dominated by politics. The conversations were secretly recorded by the 53-year-old Mr. Genn after he approached the commission, saying he was sickened by the job demands that were being made on him. Mr. Genn agreed to wear a tape recorder strapped to the small of his back and taped conversations with at least three board members.

On Oct. 10, at a time when he was seeking board support for a one-year extension of his contract, Mr. Genn had lunch at the Altadonna Resataurant in Howard Beach, Queens, with Mr. Stazzone and Mr. Lipkowitz.

Mr. Stazzone is heard on tape complaining that the deputy superintendent, Josephine Schwindt, and personnel officials in the superintendent's office were ignoring his recommendations for paraprofessionals and teaching aides. 'Getting Chopped Up'

"Being locked out?" Mr. Genn, an employee of the city's school system for 30 years, asks him.

"I'm getting chopped up," Mr. Stazzone says, adding that he had "come up with, you know, a big fat zero" whenever he made any recommendations.

When Mr. Genn asks him for suggestions on how to control the problem, Mr. Stazzone replies, "We got a dirty district" and "We're all dirty here."

"In what sense?" Mr. Genn asks him.

"We've all sold out a certain extent," Mr. Stazzone says. "All right? Out of necessity. I mean I was gonna get put at the end of the table, right?"

Mr. Stazzone goes on to say: "And I was gonna get absolutely nothing, you know? There was no negotiating done by anybody when we started up that didn't exclude Sal Stazzone. Sal Stazzone was gonna get a big zero." 'Sideways With Dignity'

Later, Mr. Lipkowitz suggests that he and Mr. Stazzone control the choice of a new deputy superintendent and that the current deputy, Ms. Schwindt, be moved "sideways with dignity." Mr. Stazzone also urges Mr. Genn to end his relationship with the Southwest Queens Educational Alliance, a coalition of parents associations, because, he says, "I'm so sick of these ladies."

Sensing the direction in which Mr. Lipkowitz was drifting, Mr. Genn suggests that Mr. Lipkowitz, a teacher in Public School 90 in Richmond Hill, Queens, might want an assignment at the local board's headquarters. In later conversations, Mr. Lipkowitz tells Mr. Genn that he is eager to have such a job, but it should "be down in the basement, like DeVincenzo."

Commission officials said the reference was to Joseph DeVincenzo, a former special assistant to Mayor Edward I. Koch, who was accused by another investigative panel of running a patronage operation out of the City Hall basement.

On the tape, Mr. Lipkowitz admits to Mr. Stazzone, "I've never heard the word 'children' or 'education' enter into our discussions in the last few years."

"With anybody," Mr. Stazzone adds, laughing.

Mr. Lipkowitz's principal, Kenneth Grover, said he was not in school yesterday and did not respond to telephone calls Mr. Grover made to his home. Mr. Stazzone has an unlisted number. First Response

Yesterday, for the first time, Mr. Sullivan, the board's treasurer and a former Republican district leader, responded to the allegations as he and other school board members entered a meeting with the Chancellor shortly before they were suspended.

"I've always acted in the best interests of the children and parents" of District 27, he said. "I'm confident I will be exonerated."

Commission officials said conversations on tape suggest that Mr. Sullivan and others could be charged with bribery for dangling the one-year contract extension to Mr. Genn as a lure to get him to fill jobs with their supporters. Transcripts of the taped conversations have been sent to the Queens District Attorney's office and to the United States Attorney's office in Brooklyn.

After suspending the board Mr. Mecklowitz immediately appointed three central-board officials to act as trustees and govern the school district for an indefinite period. School District 27, which takes in the Rockaways, Howard Beach, Woodhaven, Ozone Park and Richmond Hill neighborhoods of Queens, has 35 schools and 29,000 students and has an annual budget of \$96 million. Board Seats Regained

Three other boards - Boards 9 and 12 in the Bronx and Board 6 in Manhattan - have also been suspended in the last three years. They were reconstituted in elections last spring, with many of the former members regaining their seats. Several other boards are under investigation by grand juries and law-enforcement authorities on similar charges of political hiring.

Mr. Mecklowitz, who was briefed Friday about the information on Mr. Genn's tapes, called the nine board members into his offices yesterday for a "conciliation" meeting at which those accused might defend their behavior.

Four members - Ms. Edmondson; Frank P. Gulliscio, the board's president; Patricia N. Tubridy and Thomas Gebert - said they had urged the Chancellor not to suspend the entire board. In testimony Monday, Mr. Genn said he was certain that three board members - Ms. Edmondson, Mr. Gebert and Goldie M. Maple - were people who held the interests of children uppermost in their decision. 'With Conviction'

The meeting lasted for half an hour, then Mr. Mecklowitz closeted himself with aides. An hour later, he announced the suspension. "I do this sadly, but I do this with conviction," he said. In a letter to School Board 27, he said decisions on appointments "were not based on educational needs of the schools, qualifications of the candidates or the best interests of the children."

The board members can appeal their suspension. A lawyer for the school board, George Shebitz, said such a step was being weighed.

The three trustees are Fred H. Woodruff, director of the Office of Community School Affairs, and Antonia Carranza and William Griffith, special assistants to the Chancellor. Both Mr. Woodruff and Ms. Carranza have served as trustees in earlier suspensions. Although Mr. Genn will continue to run the district, the trustees will, as the suspended board did, make final decisions on hiring, budget and policy. 'Patronage Dispensaries'

some members, he said, should be appointed by parents, and others by the Chancellor.

Mr. Genn, who appeared nervous at the start of his first day of testimony, appeared much more relaxed yesterday and joked with reporters. He admitted he was relieved that his account had finally come out.

Monday night's sleep "was the first good night's sleep I've had in two months," he said.

October 28, 1989

Fallout From Testimony Worries Queens District

By FELICIA R. LEE

LEAD: Like most educators and parents in School District 27 in Queens this week, Toby Sohn, a special-education teacher, was mesmerized by her superintendent's testimony before the Gill Commission - tales of racial and religious bias in hiring, unnecessary jobs and a plot by some school board members to run the schools as patronage mills.

Like most educators and parents in School District 27 in Queens this week, Toby Sohn, a special-education teacher, was mesmerized by her superintendent's testimony before the Gill Commission - tales of racial and religious bias in hiring, unnecessary jobs and a plot by some school board members to run the schools as patronage mills.

"Maybe that's why I don't have any chairs," said Ms. Sohn, who works at Junior High School 210 in Ozone Park. "Maybe that's where the money went."

There were many questions this week in the southwest Queens district, one of the largest in the city's school system. Parents and educators wondered how much of the \$96 million budget was really squandered on unnecessary jobs. They wondered what impact the investigation would have on the future of decentralized school boards. They wondered whether the trouble would affect the atmosphere in the classrooms.

"This has been blatant for years -the racial remarks, the pitting of one person against another," said Donna Caltabiano, whose four children attend district schools. "The board meetings where they ask for parental input have been a farce."

"No matter what happens, we all suffer," said Vito Fiorello, the principal of Public School 97 in Woodhaven. "Our reputation as a district is hurt." The nine board members have been suspended and replaced by three trustees while the investigation into school corruption continues.

This week, the Gill Commission, named for its chairman, James G. Gill, heard testimony from the superintendent, Colman Genn, about board members who created unnecessary jobs and considered race, religion and political favors in filling jobs that ranged from school aides to assistant principals.

For eight months, Mr. Genn secretly tape recorded conversations with board members. The taped conversations revealed that one board member and his campaign manager sought to control all hiring in the district. On other tapes, board members complained that too many blacks and Jews were being hired.

For years, bitterness has existed in District 27, which encompasses 35 schools in an area including Ozone Park, Howard Beach, Breezy Point, Woodhaven and the Rockaways. More than half of the students in the district are black, but blacks said they have long had problems getting jobs and promotions in District 27. The board has only one black member.

Black and white parents said they have long felt ignored or patronized by some board members. Still, they said, their children's education had not noticeably suffered. The district's test scores in reading and math vary little from the citywide average.

The district, where 82.5 percent of the 1,690 teachers are white, has 29 white and 6 black principals.

"I knew there were problems with blacks being hired in this district," said Juanita Walker, the eighth-grade dean at J.H.S. 210 in Ozone Park. "Somewhere we have lost sight of our goal. Children should be our No. 1 goal." 'Feeding Information'

Several active members of parent associations said they were relieved that whispered rumors of corruption, patronage and prejudice were finally brought into the open.

"It's not that the parents have not been cognizant of this over the years, but we've not been in the position to prove it," said Camille Canino, first vice president of the Southwest Queens Educational Alliance, which includes 18 parent groups.

"We were feeding information to the Gill Commission," she said. "Mr. Genn has 100 percent backing from the parents here."

Susan Amlung, a spokeswoman for the the United Federation of Teachers, said the biggest concern for district teachers is that Mr. Genn will become so frustrated that he will leave. Before he took office, she said, teachers had "lots of grievances, morale was low, and there was little chance for their input."

John Falco, principal of J.H.S. 210, said the only consensus in his school is "the courage of the superintendent."

"I just have a lot of concerns about decentralization," he said. "I believe in decentralization, but there doesn't seem to be a good system of checks and balances.

"Are we saying that we can't find a way to elect officials so we can have a say in how we run our schools?"

Mary Lorraine Napoli, president of the Southwest Queens Educational Alliance, said her group will lobby to get two board members, Thomas Gebert and Colleen Edmondson, reinstated.

"With the trustees, we wonder if we're going to have representation," said Mrs. Napoli, whose two children attend J.H.S. 202 in Ozone Park. "We're trying to get our parent input back. Mr. Gebert and Mrs. Edmondson are the two board members the parents have supported." Charge of Cronyism

In testimony Monday, Mr. Genn said he was certain that Mr. Gebert, Ms. Edmondson and Goldie M. Maple, the only black board member, had the interests of children at heart. According to the tapes, three board members, James C. Sullivan, Samuel B. Granirer and Salvatore Stazzone, tried to force Mr. Genn out to control hiring.

Some board members have charged that Mr. Genn himself is guilty of cronyism. They said he created a position for his friend Glenn Traiger as his assistant and paid him daily overtime without the required board approval. The accusations were first published in New York Newsday and have been denied by Mr. Genn.

"Colleen Edmondson was president at the time and told him the board was very upset about this and it had to stop," said a board member, Patricia A. Tubridy.

Mrs. Tubridy, the mother of five school-age boys, said she feels Mr. Genn has done a disservice to the district and by implication has hurt her reputation, which she said is unblemished.

Toby Sohn, the special-education teacher, said she believed the reverberations from the Gill Commission are "going to affect property values for a while,"

"People aren't going to want to buy houses to go to these schools, even though this is really a good district," she said. "And in the end, that's the real shame."

March 16, 1990

One Investigation, One Year

LEAD: Events in the yearlong investigation by the Board of Education's Inspector General into reports of drug abuse by Matthew Barnwell, the principal of P.S. 53 in the South Bronx at the time.

Nov. 25, 1987: Michael P. Sofarelli, the Inspector General, receives memorandum from Howard S. Tames, the Deputy Executive Director of the Board of Education's Division of Personnel.

Events in the yearlong investigation by the Board of Education's Inspector General into reports of drug abuse by Matthew Barnwell, the principal of P.S. 53 in the South Bronx at the time.

Nov. 25, 1987: Michael P. Sofarelli, the Inspector General, receives memorandum from Howard S. Tames, the Deputy Executive Director of the Board of Education's Division of Personnel. Mr. Tames said he received a telephone call about Mr. Barnwell's drug abuse from a person who claimed to be a teacher at P.S. 53 in the Bronx. Mr. Tames described the caller as intelligent, concerned and forthright, but also worried about retribution from the principal and other district personnel.

Dec. 4: The complaint is discussed at the Inspector General's weekly case assignment meeting.

March 10, 1988: A confidential source in Mr. Barnwell's district confirms there are suspicions that Mr. Barnwell is a drug and alcohol abuser.

April 19: Investigator Larry Kendricks interviews the parents association president.

June 10: Mr. Kendricks interviews a former United Federation of Teachers chapter chairman.

June 20: Mr. Kendricks interviews three parents association board members.

Sept. 28: Mr. Kendricks obtains a list of parents association members.

Oct. 4: Mr. Kendricks interviews a former parents association president and an assistant principal, Jesse Rines. They both believe Mr. Barnwell has a substance abuse problem and they provide specific information.

Oct. 14: Mr. Kendricks obtains the names of two teachers who may be willing to provide information.

Oct. 26: Mr. Kendricks interviews one of the teachers.

Nov. 9: The police arrest Mr. Barnwell. He is eventually convicted of purchasing two vials of crack.

Source: Gill Commission report