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Edward Stancik, 47, New York Schools Investigator, Dies

By ABBY GOODNOUGH

Edward F. Stancik, who as chief investigator of the New York City school system over the last 12 years gained a reputation as a relentless -- some school officials said overzealous -- pursuer of corruption and misconduct, died yesterday in Manhattan. He was 47.

The cause was not disclosed. Mr. Stancik, who was under care at New York University Medical Center, had chronic heart problems.

During his tenure, Mr. Stancik helped bring about some important systemwide changes, including a state law that diminished the powers of local school boards, several of which he exposed as corrupt. Yet sometimes, cases that he publicized in dramatic news conferences later proved not as outrageous as he had made them out to be.

Until Mr. Stancik was appointed special commissioner of investigation for the city schools in 1990, the board's own investigative division was the only check on corruption in the schools, and was considered too cozy with those it was supposed to keep honest.

In contrast, Mr. Stancik operated independently of the board, ranking a succession of schools chancellors who sometimes accused him of overdramatizing cases to enhance his own reputation. None, however, could force him out, since Mr. Stancik could be removed only by the city's commissioner of investigation, who reports to the mayor. Mr. Stancik's office was created in 1990 as an outgrowth of the Gill Commission, which was appointed during the Koch administration to investigate patronage, politics and corruption in the school system. The commission concluded that the board's investigative arm was "reminiscent of the Keystone Kops," persuading Mayor David N. Dinkins to create the independent investigator's post.

During his 12-year tenure, Mr. Stancik released hundreds of scathing reports that accused everyone from teachers to custodians to community school board members of flouting the law in scandalous fashion. He was especially relentless in uncovering sexual abuse of students, and some education officials complained that his headline-grabbing exposés made the problem seem far more prevalent than it was.

Last year, however, after several sex-abuse complaints against teachers and administrators were widely publicized, Schools Chancellor Harold O. Levy joined Mr. Stancik in pressuring school officials to report cases that, in past years, might not have prompted any action.

In 1992, Mr. Stancik released a report detailing chronic financial abuses by custodians and the failure of the school system to stop them. Some custodians, he said, had created fake jobs for nonexistent assistants and then collected the salaries, and many spent most of their working hours at other jobs or otherwise away from work. The report led to a state law that allowed stricter oversight of custodians.

In 1997, after Mr. Stancik released a stinging report on gangs, Rudy Crew, then the chancellor, bitterly accused Mr. Stancik of producing exaggerated reports that unfairly damaged the reputation of the school system and its employees.

Despite his contempt for Mr. Stancik, Dr. Crew used his investigations of corrupt local school boards to help persuade the State Legislature to strip the boards of much of their hiring and firing powers in 1996. That change was considered one of the most significant in the school system in decades, as it sharply increased the chancellor's powers.

Mr. Stancik's many reports on violence in schools helped bolster Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani's argument that the Division of Schools Safety, then run by the Board of Education, should be taken over by the city Police Department. The board agreed to that change in 1998.

Mr. Stancik, who headed a staff of 60, had the power to subpoena, take testimony under oath and arrest, but not to prosecute. If he found evidence of criminal action, he turned it over to the appropriate district attorney for prosecution. Of 196 criminal arrests by Mr. Stancik's office since it was created, 132 have led to guilty pleas and 8 to convictions. Twenty-three cases are pending.

Some of his investigations did not live up to their promise. In 1999, he accused 52 teachers, principals and other educators of helping students ratchet up scores on standardized tests in what was described as one of the biggest cheating scandals in American public schools. But a year later, roughly half of those accused had been reinstated, either because the evidence was insufficient or such punishment was deemed unwarranted.

Edward Francis Stancik was born on Dec. 2, 1954, in Chicago, and grew up in a suburb. He was an only child, whose mother died when he was 14. His father, a printer, helped put him through the University of Illinois, where he majored in economics. He went on to

Columbia Law School, where he was managing editor of the law review

After graduating from law school in 1979, he worked for the Manhattan district attorney, Robert M. Morgenthau, for 11 years. He rose to deputy chief of the rackets bureau, earning a reputation as a discerning administrator and a skillful trial lawyer.

Mr. Stancik, who lived in TriBeCa, underwent open-heart surgery in 1995 and again in 1997, to replace damaged heart valves. Although he was intensely private about his health problems, his increasingly gaunt appearance made it clear that they continued to plague him.

Mr. Stancik, who is survived by his father, Edward, and stepmother, Therese, often said that his outsider status was the best tool for illuminating and ending corruption that might otherwise be overlooked or even tolerated within the clannish school system. "There is a sort of culture at the Board of Education that is difficult to pierce," he said in an interview. "When trouble develops, the attitude should be 'Let's get to the bottom of this.' At the Board of Education, the attitude often is 'Let's get our friends out of this.' "