

External review notes issues with hiring, pay in Milwaukee Public Schools' HR department

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Milwaukee Public Schools has struggled to oversee recruitment, hiring, pay and discipline of staff, according to an external review of its Office of Human Resources.

MPS requested the review of its HR department earlier this year in response to findings from an operational audit, Superintendent Brenda Cassellius said during a July 31 school board meeting. The review was conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools, a member organization for 81 districts in large cities across the country.

"Tonight's presentation focused solely on their observations," Cassellius said of the review. "It is not yet a response, and it does not include solutions. This is the starting point."

The review comes after Gov. Tony Evers requested the operational audit, and a second audit on educational outcomes, in response to financial reporting issues within MPS that surfaced in spring 2024. The operational audit eventually called for sweeping changes, noting "leadership instability, a culture resistant to change, high staff turnover, and ineffective systems and reporting protocols."

Results of the HR review share similarities.

"We have been waiting on this part to be able to drive deeper into the recommendations," Cassellius said. "We know, as part of our work with finance, to clean that up, we have to be looking at HR at the same time."

Ray Hart, COGS' executive director, said the organization reviewed MPS' HR department in 2009, 2013 and 2019. The district fully implemented only one of 19 recommendations from the 2019 review, he said.

"One of the first things we recommend at the moment is that you pay close attention to actually implementing those things that are suggested," Hart said during his presentation on preliminary findings of the HR review.

Audit points to issues hiring, retaining staff

MPS needs to improve its practices for hiring new staff, the HR review said — especially since hiring can take months. It called the current teacher recruitment model "insufficient."

"This has direct impact on your students," Hart said.

On employee retention, the review said few training opportunities exist, contributing to a "static work culture."

MPS also lacks a data tracking system for job applicants, the review found. Principals are being asked to vet teacher candidates themselves, without HR help. The district also hasn't recently completed a "staffing-level analysis" to identify jobs needed in each department.

"We couldn't find it," Hart said.

The review praised MPS for employing many staff with long careers in the district, saying their experience should be leveraged.

MPS is "losing a lot of talent on a regular basis," board member Christopher Fons said. He described being hired in 1999, and having had issues with HR since then. Fons worked as a teacher for 24 years at Riverside High School.

MPS staff tell auditors of inconsistencies in pay

MPS has "inequitable" pay practices that drive feelings of unequal treatment among staff, the review found.

Incoming employees are sometimes paid more than existing ones, according to COGS — even if the incoming candidate has the same, or less, experience.

That issue is "effectively incentivizing current employees to seek employment outside of MPS," the review found.

Cassellius said the district should consider investing in a study of pay for all district positions.

MPS staff being disciplined inconsistently, shuffled between schools

The review found discipline policies are being unevenly applied across MPS. In some cases, employees are shifted between schools after issues arise, which the review said "displaces underperforming staff without accountability or remediation."

Principals are increasingly asked to manage employee relations investigations, even if they have little training or legal guidance to do so, the review found.

Employees have also been given inconsistent, or even contradictory, information when they contact HR, the review said. Some principals reported never hearing back.

"Depending upon who you contacted, principals and others got different responses," Hart said.

HR department needs consistent staffing, communication

The HR department is staffed by people who are "hard-working and dedicated," the review found.

But the department has too many interim roles and unfilled leadership jobs, creating "inconsistent strategic direction, slowed decision-making, and reduced guidance and support for staff," it added.

MPS is currently interviewing for a chief HR officer, Cassellius said July 31.

The review also recommended automating some HR tasks, given its staff are spending 40% to 75% of their time on manual and transactional activities.

The COGS review also noted a "breakdown in communications" from the HR department and district more broadly.

"We heard a number of different examples during this process, where staff, for example, found out about things at this meeting, of the board of directors, rather than (the department) effectively communicating with staff about transitions, things that are changing in the district, etc.," Hart said.

Darryl Jackson said that, as a board member, he's reached out to various MPS departments and has been told that staff are not to speak with school board members.

"Information that I want to seek out, they're not able to give, due to whatever culture (was) set before. The culture that's here, before my time ... has been ugly, has been very stained," he said.