



MPS May Be 'Losing The Best And Brightest' Due To HR Problems; Superintendent Pledges Change

By EMILY FILES · MAR 5, 2020

When Andrew Martin was hired to work in MPS in 2012, he showed up to his assigned high school and was greeted with confusion. "The principal said, 'Oh I didn't know we were getting somebody. What position are you here for?' And I said 'Well, I was hired as a social studies teacher,'" he remembers.

The mix-up was sorted out, and Martin stayed with MPS for eight years. But along the way, he kept hearing other stories about human resources mishaps and delays that frustrate even teachers who really want to work for MPS.

"I can't imagine how many teachers ... we've lost because they weren't able to get questions answered," Martin says. "Or if you get hired at a job and you do a background check and drug test, that takes a matter of days; whereas here, it takes weeks upon weeks to fill those positions."

Those stories are backed up by an [independent review](#) of MPS's HR office conducted by the [Council of Great City Schools](#) in summer of 2019. Superintendent Keith Posley, who has been in his job since 2018, called for the review.

>> [Read the full Council of Great City Schools report here.](#)

The report is critical, painting a picture of a complacent department with no big-picture plan for recruitment and retention of high quality teachers.

In a time when Wisconsin school districts are facing a shortage of educators, the review calls into question whether MPS's own HR operations are hampering the district's ability to attract and retain staff.

Although the review was discussed at a school board meeting in November, the document was not posted publicly. WUWM obtained the report through a records request with the school district.

[Peter Goff](#), an expert in educational administration at UW-Madison, read the 40-page report at WUWM's request.

"What this [review] tells me is this is an HR department that's bureaucratic, it's about pushing things through," Goff says. "It's not about talent management. It's not about teachers. It's not about making sure our schools are staffed with the best people."

A "Passive" HR Office Amid Teacher Shortage

MPS' human resources problems are long-running. In fact, this was the third review of the department in 10 years, and many of the issues identified in 2009 and 2012 reports were the same in 2019.

But the response to the review may be different this time around. Teachers' union officials, school board members and HR staff say they think Superintendent Posley is serious about making improvements.

"As far as previous reviews, I can't speak to," Posley tells WUWM. "But as far as this review, I can 100% assure you that progress is being made there...we're looking at this as an opportunity to do better and become stronger as an organization." There's a lot of work to do. The report says MPS human resources "suffers from inertia" and is "frozen in the past."

"The council team saw no evidence of an overall districtwide or HR philosophy, strategy, or detailed recruitment and retention plan for teachers, especially those that reflected the diversity of the students they served," the report authors wrote. They go on to say, "No one at the school or district levels are held accountable for retaining the district's best talent. It is also not clear that the district knows who its best talent is."

David Palmer, a former L.A. Unified School District administrator, was the lead investigator in the Council of Great City Schools review. He says he's seen many of the same issues in other school districts, but one thing that stood out about MPS was the feedback from principals.

On a scale of 1-10, principals rated the HR office a 4.8. They told Palmer that HR was so unresponsive during the hiring process that they often had to go in-person to central office to get answers.

"Candidates aren't hearing from HR, they're not getting calls back...and they're going to the principal who interviewed them, and they're trying to find out, 'hey what's going on, I've got other opportunities,'" Palmer says. "[Principals] actually have to leave campus and rattle the cage a little bit to get things moving."

Leia Sceptur is MPS' interim chief human resources officer. In an interview with WUWM, she emphasized that the district has four people in charge of hiring 600 or 700 teachers each year.

"And unfortunately, while we do the best we can with making sure we're having as many personal touchpoints as possible, sometimes sheer volume can impact the quickness of those responses," Sceptur says.

MPS Working To Improve HR

MPS has made changes in the last several months in response to the review. The district [is buying](#) new applicant tracking software, reducing hurdles in the physical and drug screenings, and putting more people in charge of responding to candidate questions.

MPS is also trying become more nimble with snagging good educators early by offering contingent contracts to applicants at job fairs and student teachers, something that wasn't done previously.

Garland Elementary School principal Steven Krull says he's noticed a more aggressive recruitment effort with student teachers at his school.

"I do see contingency contracts now, I do see some high-level HR people coming out, I don't know if the word is 'scouting' for student teachers? But I am seeing that those types of behaviors are there when they weren't before," Krull says.

But there are some recommendations from the HR review that have not happened. The very first recommendation is to hire a permanent HR chief. Leia Sceptur has been in the interim role for a year and a half.

The review says: "Leaders in interim positions appeared to approach their work tentatively and were hesitant to implement needed change for fear of 'rocking the boat.'"

Posley declined to provide a timeline in which he plans to hire a permanent HR director, but says Scoptur "does not look at this from an interim standpoint."

Peter Goff, the UW-Madison professor, says improving operations in the HR department is key to improving academic outcomes for MPS' more than 70,000 students.

"It's not a 'sexy' problem," Goff explains. "But until they actually are able to take that seriously and acknowledge the fundamental role of talent management and human capital in the HR department, we're (going to) see these problems that Milwaukee has struggled with for the last 20, 30 years are going to continue to plague its system."

When asked how he plans to measure whether MPS is successful in reforming HR operations, Superintendent Posley said the improvements will show up in students' test scores.

"They will show up in student academic outcomes," Posley says. "When we move the academic needle, we know we have the right people on the bus and we're moving in the right direction."

Hiring season gets underway soon, and the HR improvements MPS is working on will be tested.

Andrew Martin, the teacher from the beginning of this story, wasn't left with a great impression of human resources on his way out of the district in early February. Martin left his job at James Madison Academic Campus after he received an appealing job offer somewhere else. He says it was an emotional decision for him, and the response from HR was "cold."

"They pulled out a one-page form and handed it to me and said, 'Well here, you have to fill this out,'" Martin says. "And that was it. There was no exit interview, there was no commentary of 'why, what else could we have done?'"

Interim Chief Human Resources Officer Leia Scoptur says the fact that Martin was not offered an exit interview was an oversight. After WUWM notified her of the issue, Scoptur said the forms would be updated.

MPS administrators plan to update the school board on a regular basis about changes in HR. The next update is scheduled for March 17. At that meeting, there will be opportunity for the public give testimony.