

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

School district misguided on media policy

If you follow this page, you know we have had our share of disagreements with the administration and board of the Springfield Public Schools over what we see as a tendency toward secrecy.

A sampling of headlines on editorials in recent months provides illustration:

"Notice to board — fix meetings: School leaders must follow Sunshine Law after embarrassment."

"No grin in school board spin: Board should support president's call to meet according to law."

"Springfield schools' stipends too loose: School district has a transparency problem."

And, coincidentally, following our in-depth report on stipends paid to top administrators, the

district announced a new media

policy clearly targeting our reporter, Claudette Riley, for increased attention.

As a result, requests for interviews and information from top administrators must generally be funneled through Marc Maness, director of community relations and strategic planning for the district. Maness or one of his staff members now sit in on almost every interview conducted by Riley. They record the interviews and often issue

their own one-sided "reports" on the conversations before Riley publishes her more complete story in the News-Leader.

The district acknowledges it has no complaints with the accuracy of Riley's stories — they just say it is to ensure a "consistent

message" in district coverage.

It's a unique approach — one I have never seen in more than 30

years of newspapering. None of our other reporters faces similar "handling" in covering local government entities.

And, personally, I think it is exactly the opposite direction the district should be heading. They are circling the wagons, and trying to rely more on managing communication directly with parents and other stakeholders. Instead, I think they should be

expanding their information efforts to increase the public's confidence in what they are doing.

While we think this issue affects everyone, we admit a self-interest in knowing what candidates for two seats on the Springfield school board think about the district's public information policies and what efforts they would make to improve openness and transparency.

The one incumbent seeking reelection, Tom Prater, ap-

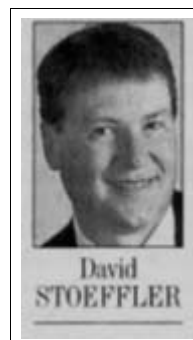
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Sunshine Week

This week, March 13-19, is Sunshine Week, a national project "to promote a dialogue about the importance of open government and freedom of information." While created by journalists, Sunshine Week is a way to remind everyone about the public's right to know what government is doing, and why.

For more information, go to: <http://www.sunshineweek.org/>





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proached the subject gingerly in our Editorial Board interview. "It's not my role as a board member to dictate how the district's public relations system works," Prater said. "It's my role to tell the superintendent, as a board member and we as the board, how we want it to be open and transparent."

Prater defended the board's decision to end meetings of its "informal" Finance Committee (of which he was one of two members). The committee met without public notice, agendas or taking minutes — all in apparent violation of the state Sunshine Law — but was disbanded after Riley's story put a spotlight on it.

The committee meetings, he said, were just "an informal situation to provide a second set of eyes on district finances, to provide feedback to the finance staff as to what the board was going to expect to hear, what the board wanted to see, and yes this is information that you need to flesh out and bring to the board." Once concerns were raised, it was easier just to disband it, Prater said.

Carl Herd, one of the chief petitioners who succeeded in getting signatures to compel a state audit of the district, described the district as "secretive." As a board member, he would try to expand public involvement and information

"We can do a lot to improve public relations and the PR even between the administration and teachers," Herd said. "I don't care if you've got a critic out there, let's answer their questions. Let's not close it down."

Don Carriker Jr. agreed the district needs to improve transparency. "They work for us — the taxpayers," he said.

Mark Heffington was particularly concerned about the district's handling of the stipends — and has been critical of the way the district responded by singling out Riley for more attention. The stipends were not really pay for extra work, in Heffington's opinion — they were bonuses.

"It concerns me that those things go on and we don't know about it," Heffington said. "Transparency is something I'll be an advocate for if I get on that board."

Denise Fredrick, a former teacher and administrator in the district, said she did not have issues working with the media in the past but noted there was not an "element of fear" at that time.

"If what you're doing is good and you're doing your best and you are accountable for how you're spending your money, then there shouldn't be a fear of presenting that to someone," Fredrick said.

"The media and the school district must work as a team because we have to get the information out to our stakeholders."

David Stoeffler is executive editor of the Springfield News-Leader. You may e-mail him,