

• Dallas ISD administrator investigated over use of district money for Arlington bowling trip

By MATTHEW HAAG

Staff Writer

mhaag@dallasnews.com

Published: 27 July 2012 10:42 PM

A Dallas ISD administrator recently promoted to one of the district's top positions was investigated in a new controversy involving the use of taxpayer money, leading some district watchdogs to call for her firing.

Shirley Ison-Newsome was investigated for authorizing a \$1,500 bowling and laser tag event in Arlington for staff team building just weeks after district officials ordered employees to stop out-of-town trips.

The March investigation, which was reported this week by WFAA (Channel 8), found that Ison-Newsome violated a directive issued to curb excessive spending.

In her 37 years with the district, Ison-Newsome has been involved in other controversies over the use of taxpayer money, including a boys-only field trip this year to see the war movie *Red Tails* that cost \$57,000 and new bathrooms that cost \$6,000 for her office suite in the late 1990s.

"I don't understand why the district holds on to her," said Jesse Diaz, a community activist who said he planned to send Superintendent Mike Miles a letter Friday urging him to fire her. "She has proven her incompetency over and over again."

Miles, who recently named Ison-Newsome to an assistant superintendent position and gave her a \$23,000 raise, said Friday that he was unaware of the investigation into the bowling trip. "I don't know enough details to comment," he said.

In June, Miles defended promoting her, saying that she had earned the position.

Ison-Newsome was among more than 50 administrators who were told by Miles to reapply for positions with the DISD. She was one of few in the school leadership department to stay with the district.

"You have to remember that I didn't decide to keep anyone," Miles said at the time. "Everyone had to reapply for their jobs."

Ison-Newsome said Friday that the August trip to Alley Cats Bowl was approved months before the district sent out the directive banning such trips.

"Plans for the team building activity at Alley Cats, a facility known for providing team building experiences for employees, were submitted and approved by the appropriate staff during the second semester of the previous school year," she said in a statement.

The directive, issued in July 2011 by the district's chief of staff, banned the use of external facilities for meetings. The order came after an investigation by *The Dallas Morning News* found nearly \$60 million in DISD expenditures over four years on out-of-town trips, fancy retreats, expensive parties and other extravagances.

Ison-Newsome told district investigators that she never saw the directive. She also told investigators that "there were bigger problems in the district to worry about than this event," according to the report from the Office of Professional Responsibility.

Investigators concluded, however, that Ison-Newsome violated district policies and that the violations were grounds for termination, according to the report.

"If there is anyone covered in Teflon, it's Shirley Ison-Newsome," said Mary Ann Climer, a district watchdog and vice-chair of Dallas Friends of Public Education. "Somebody has to dig up how she continues to survive. It's time for her to go home."

Michael MacNaughton, a member of DISD's budget review commission, also said it's time for Ison-Newsome to step down. "There is a fundamental hubris that exists among some administrators that the rules are not for them to follow," he said.

Ison-Newsome's name has been raised in other instances questioning the use of DISD money:

In February, the district came under fire for spending \$57,000 to send fifth-grade boys on a field trip to see *Red Tails*. DISD email messages show the trip was conceived by Ison-Newsome, who was then the district's interim chief of schools.

She and an assistant decided to pay for the trip by taking \$50,000 out of a \$300,000 fund for an early childhood initiative, the emails revealed. The Texas Education Agency is investigating the district's use of federal money to pay for the trip.

In 2006, an investigation by *The News* revealed widespread misuse of DISD procurement credit cards. Purchases by Ison-Newsome were among questionable expenditures. She spent \$246 on flag-themed pillows at the gift shop at George Washington's home in Mount Vernon, Va., and \$523 — which included \$200 for shipping — for two portable air conditioners purchased from an airline catalog.

Ison-Newsome said in a statement at the time that the pillows were used for "American Education Week and summer holiday activities" and that she ordered the air conditioners because "my staff was asked to work for three days in a field house that did not offer air conditioning."

In 1997, district officials investigated the authorization of \$6,000 for two new bathrooms added to Ison-Newsome's suite of offices at Nolan Estes Plaza when Ison-Newsome was an area superintendent.

Ison-Newsome sued former Superintendent Yvonne Gonzalez and other administrators, accusing them of retaliation and defamation of character by raising the issue to deflect attention from the \$90,000 spent to renovate Gonzalez's office. Ison-Newsome's lawsuit was ultimately thrown out. Gonzalez was convicted of misappropriation of school funds and went to prison.