



EDUCATION

School district to software vendor: Give us what we paid for

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August 30, 2018 01:57 PM

Updated August 30, 2018 05:04 PM

After doubling its budget and timeline on a massive software project, the School District of Manatee County is asking the project vendor to fix a litany of core problems — for free.

The district already spent an estimated \$20 million to install PeopleSoft, a business management system that falls under the umbrella of enterprise resource planning (ERP) software. The original budget was less than \$10 million.

Ciber was hired to implement the software, but its contract ended last week and the job is far from over. Superintendent Cynthia Saunders is expected to send the company a list of defects on Friday.

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“They’re eager to come meet with us because they would like the project to finish accurately and completely,” she recently said.

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Speaking at Tuesday’s school board workshop, Saunders said she wants the problems fixed at no cost to the district, and that her next move is dependent on the company’s response.

The software went “live” on July 1, but district employees recently worked on more than a dozen problems, according to a list distributed at the board meeting.

Though an Aug. 20 news release said the issues were not affecting students or teachers, that sentiment was challenged on Tuesday. Board Chair Scott Hopes said Manatee Technical College exemplified one of the main issues.

As a campus that needs parts and raw materials for its technical programs, MTC is hindered by ordering problems and “substantial delays,” Hopes said.

“If these students don’t have parts, whether it’s marine repair or auto repair, and if the workers don’t have raw materials, their education is going to slow down,” he said.

Saunders and Heather Jenkins, the district’s chief financial officer, said ordering delays were a district-wide problem.

The superintendent said she also addressed payroll issues last week. The district reached out to affected teachers, wrote paper checks and, in some cases, hand-delivered them.

Paper was central to the district’s operations for nearly 20 years. The new software was meant to save time and effort in the finance, human resources, purchasing and payroll departments.

Saunders recently called on George Kosmac, a previous deputy superintendent in Seminole County Public Schools, to assess the project’s current standing. He called the business processes “insufficient and useless” and then offered three costly solutions.

He also said the district owed \$1.36 million in unpaid invoices. At the recent workshop, Saunders said the district was withholding payments to Ciber.

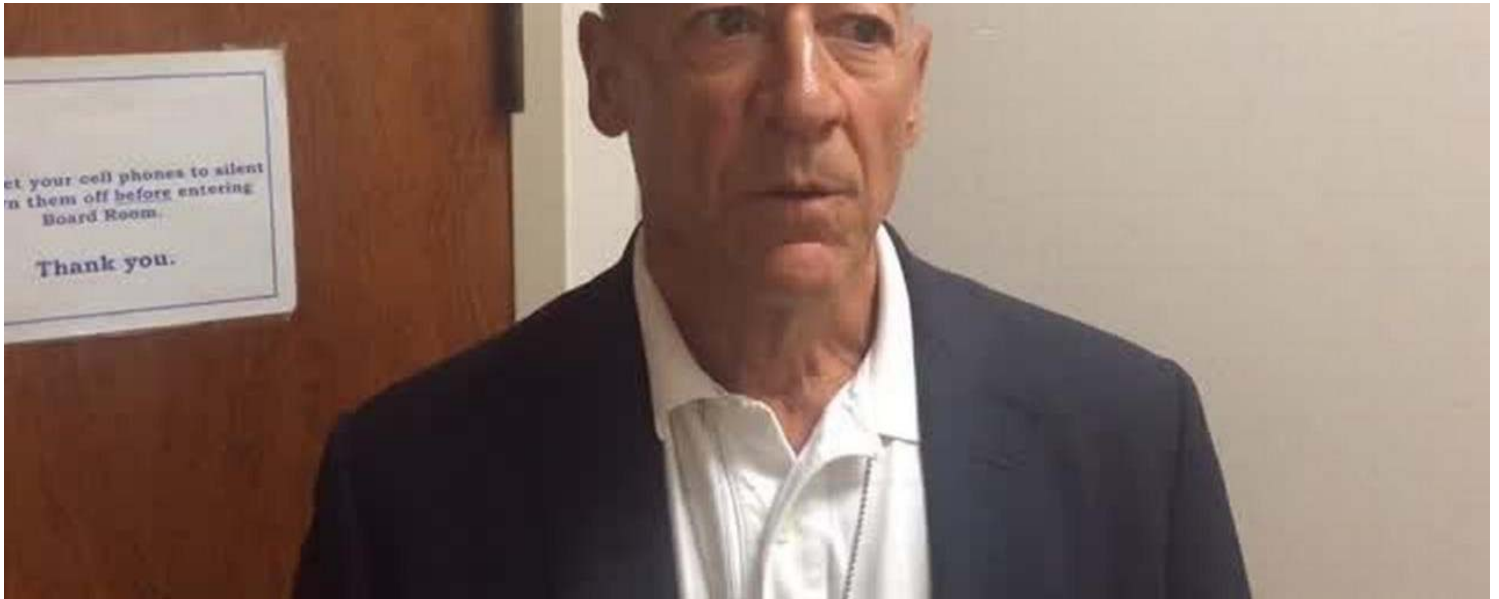
The deputy superintendent of business services and operations, Ron Ciranna, is currently on paid administrative leave while the district investigates unauthorized payments made during the ERP project. At least \$107,000 was spent without school board approval, according to Kosmac’s report.

Kosmac is now tasked with seeing the project to its completion, and Ciranna’s job is being carried out by Doug Wagner on an interim basis. He also serves as the director of adult, career and technical education for the district.

The Florida Auditor General is expected to review the project, and investigators from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement recently met with district officials.

“We knew we were going to have a few challenges, but we have a great team of people who are identifying those challenges and working out solutions,” Saunders has said. “And I can assure you we will have a solid plan after Friday of our next step.”





Ron Ciranna, deputy superintendent for operations for the School District of Manatee County, said an overhaul of the system's software system will require additional time and money.

By Bradenton Herald Staff

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