

A Hunter's Guide to Tracking Down School Corruption

- 1) **Get the Lay of the Land.** Find out some *general facts* about the school district. Useful information may include:
 - a. *Total annual revenue*; cash reserves; property tax rate; proportion of local, state, and federal funding.
 - b. *Total annual expenses*; total debt; debt service payments; the total and the average salary for teachers, staff, and administration; total expenditure on equipment, buildings, consultants, utilities, security, professional development (conventions, seminars, etc.), travel/food/lodging, advertising, community outreach, elections, extra-curricular activities, transportation, and board functions.
 - c. *Total student enrollment*; the number of buildings; the number of schools; total number of teachers, staff, and administrators.
 - d. *Policies*; hiring and firing practices; awarding of contracts (bidding policy and no-bid policy); awarding compensation/stipends to employees for extra duty; accounting practices; authorization policy for expenditures and payments; credit card or P-card policy.
 - e. *Personnel*; employed full-time and part-time positions with their salary, job description, and the name of the employee; their years of service; their reputations and history; information on board members.
 - f. *Outside Contractors*; how many, and how often they do work for the district; whether the contract is competitive (public schools have to offer contracts to multiple firms and allow them to bid for the job – they often violate this law!); how much the district pays a contractor.

Helpful Tip: You can find some of this information on the school's website, and other information will be available on the state's website (the Department of Secondary and Elementary Education, or DESE for short). A Google search should help you find some things as well.

Some of the information, however, may only be in the district's records. These records are public documents. You have the right to know this information... so request it! Always make your requests in writing, and make a copy for yourself along with the date it was sent. Make it clear that you are making a *Sunshine Law request for information*. This means that the person is legally obligated to answer. For more information on the Missouri Sunshine Laws and how to use them, see the attached guide.

2) Observe Your School's Routines

- a. *Attend Board meetings.* School Boards are required to hold regular (usually monthly) public meetings. They often violate the Sunshine Laws by going into closed, private session without a good reason. Rate the Board for its secrecy or openness, look at its agendas (they must publish one before each meeting) for items of interest; rate the Board for how well they keep their records (minutes).
- b. *Interview staff and teachers.* This includes janitors, hall monitors, secretaries, and administrators. Do not neglect substitute teachers – some of them are retired teachers who know a great deal, and some of the younger ones hang out in the teacher's lounge and get the latest rumors.
- c. *Try requesting school records.* Practice using the Sunshine Laws to make requests for public information about the school district that aren't particularly sensitive or obscure. See how well the request is received, if the attitude is polite or rude, and how much time it takes (it should only take 3 days by law). Develop a rapport with the secretarial staff if possible.

3) Sniff Out the Details

- a. *Look for nepotism.* Nepotism is the practice of hiring friends and relatives even when they aren't qualified for the job, or there are better candidates for the job. School boards and administrators hire relatives all the time (particularly husbands and wives). They will often award these relatives with promotions and salary raises for no reason.
- b. *Look for hidden perks.* School boards love to hand out "stipends", "allowances", "annuities", or other "compensation" without a good reason. These extra payouts are usually given to administrators. They don't show up as part of the person's salary, so they will be hidden in the school budget, or in the employee contracts somewhere. Pay extra careful attention to the *school superintendent's contract* – if there is corruption, you can bet that he or she is involved and getting extra bonuses. Also, make sure to look into paid *travel, food, and lodging* for employees, and how often they get to go on these trips (usually to conventions, seminars, conferences, etc.).
- c. *Try to get credit card purchase receipts.* Credit cards are the easiest things to abuse, yet school boards often hand them out to administrators with very little oversight, and pay the bills without looking at what they were used for. Unfortunately, it's often very

hard to get a detailed list of credit card purchases, either because schools don't take the trouble to keep that information (by law they should), or because the credit cards are being abused and they want to keep it hidden. If a school refuses to provide a list of purchases for their credit cards, that is a serious red flag that something is very wrong.

- d. *Get detailed budget information on what was purchased and why.* School budgets often will tell you how much was spent, and who got paid, but they won't tell you what was actually bought (like food, or lawn trimming service). It can be tedious, but sometimes it's worth the effort to track down why that unexplained lump of money was paid to Jules Robberguy.
- e. *Track down any closed or non-competitive bidding for contracts.* Rigging bids for the benefit of certain companies is unfortunately a common practice, particularly when the business is associated with a board member.
- f. *Look for missing, under-used, or surplus inventory.* Schools often waste a lot of money paying for things they don't use, and then waste even more money paying to store it someplace. Inventory records can also reveal schemes that involve illegally selling school property on the side, or the embezzlement of funds with phony purchases.

4) **Pursue and Persist**

- a. *Be prepared to be ignored.* Administrators often think that public records are not their responsibility. These people will show resistance and indifference to your requests. If they're guilty of something, they will be actively hostile to you.
- b. *Be polite.* Even when they are rude, and you are frustrated, it pays to be polite.
- c. *Know your rights.* Make sure to get a general idea of how the Sunshine Laws work. When an official violates the law, notify them in writing that they are in violation and repeat your request. That way, if anything come to trial, you have evidence that they had full knowledge of the law and broke it anyway.
- d. *Approach multiple officials with the same request.* You might get lucky; if one ignores you, the other might not.
- e. *Do not be bullied or threatened.* Stand up for yourself if they get nasty. Call their bluffs, and get help if you need it. Remember that you are not alone and that they are in the wrong, not you.

5) **Trap the Guilty Parties**

- a. *You may petition for a State Audit.* If the school district is missing a lot of public records, or if something looks pretty shady but you don't have good hard proof, or if a district refuses to give public records and gets hostile, then you should probably go to the State Auditor with a petition. The rules for circulating the petition and getting signatures can be found here:

<http://auditor.mo.gov/auditinfo/petition> (State Auditor's website)

http://www.missourivolunteermovement.com/Library/VM_Petition_Audit_Process.docx (Missouri Volunteer Movement website)

- b. *You may go to the media.* If you've uncovered some pretty damaging evidence, and can show the proof, then the media may pick up the story. You should also contact the State Auditor's Office with your evidence and request an audit (without a petition).
- c. *You may go to the police.* It's rare, but you may uncover something that is outright criminal. This is a serious matter since it will likely involve prison for one or more people. This could be dangerous for you, since criminals can do desperate things when they are cornered. Notify the local or state authorities, as well as the State Auditor. Then notify the media, just in case the authorities don't take action.