

PRIVATIZATION: A Dirty Word for Public Schools

- Lee County, FL: The Lee County, FL Superintendent noted that the district had previously contracted custodial services out to ServiceMaster. The Superintendent indicated that the school district ended up losing money on the deal and bought out the contract to bring the cleaning services back into the district's control.¹
- New Orleans, LA: New Orleans had to fire their contractor for escalating costs, uncut grass, filthy bathrooms, and dead animals in the classrooms. The school district estimated they would save about \$2 million/year by bringing the work back in-house. The contractor, AME, was expected to be an improvement on the previous contractors, Nolmar and ServiceMaster, which also were plagued with very serious quality problems.²
- Duval County, FL: ServiceMaster was brought on board in 1996 to get the schools cleaner, but complaints of unclean floors, unvacuumed carpets, trash not picked up, and chalkboards left dirty became an issue. Note that given the quality concerns, district officials planned to conduct monthly and weekly evaluations of schools (i.e. additional public funds spent). At one point, a large number of principals said custodial services were "as bad -- if not worse -- than ever."³ A ServiceMaster official defended the dirty schools by stating they were only **7 months** into their contract. In Duval Co, the employees remained employees of the county, but ServiceMaster was the manager and reduced the number of custodial positions by 51.
- Washington, DC: In Washington DC, ServiceMaster (Register's preferred contractor in Chattanooga and NC) first got a \$105,000 study contract which it then expanded into a \$14 million contract. In three years, they never had to compete in a bid process. ServiceMaster also became, according to the *WP*, "one of the most powerful forces within DC public schools, supervising 1000 custodians and tradesmen and helping to decide who gets hired and who keeps his job." ServiceMaster's ever-growing contract "forced the schools to cut money for books, overtime, and special programs for children." Control board analysts and the school CFO said the deal did not save the system money. Another concern: ServiceMaster purchases \$ 8 million in supplies a year with virtually no oversight, and 30% to 40% of the goods come from its own subsidiaries, according to ServiceMaster. School personnel told the Post that there were delays in getting basic supplies and an overdependence on subcontractors for basic repairs.⁴
- Assumption Parish, LA: In Assumption Parish, Louisiana, elementary school officials needed to treat a difficult flea problem in the school. Twenty-one months later, the school system spent \$ 1 million to clean the schools of the remnants of the pesticide, is fighting a class-action lawsuit filed by parents of some of the schoolchildren, has filed suit to have its insurance company and other companies pay for the cleanup, and was

¹ "District looks at privatizing custodial services, too," *Naples Daily News*, 6/26/09.

² "N.O. Schools chief will fire janitorial firm," *Times Picayune*, 10/9/04.

³ "Questioning cleanliness: some doubt firm's effectiveness," *Florida Times Union*, 1/31/98.

⁴ "DC schools service deal skirted bids; superintendent helped firm expand maintenance contract," *The Washington Post*, 11/10/1996.

sanctioned by the state Department of Agriculture and Forestry. This all happened when kids came home sick and disoriented after being in classrooms that had been sprayed with a pesticide only four hours earlier. ServiceMaster had the custodial contract in the school and supervised the spraying. The chemical used was not registered for sale in the state, was applied by a custodian untrained in pesticides, and was improperly applied inside the school and on the grounds. ServiceMaster was fined.⁵

- Virginia Beach, VA: Cancelled their Servicemaster contract. The superintendent said ServiceMaster did not fulfill the district's key goals: freeing principals to focus attention on instruction and reaping appreciable savings.⁶
- Manchester, NH: a contract janitor hired by contractor WFF&A pleaded guilty in 1983 to second-degree murder. On parole, he was hired by the contractor to work as a janitor at Parkside Junior High School. The city's custodians were replaced the previous summer with private contractors. The invitation to bid on the custodial work required that "Prior to placing an individual in City facilities all prospective cleaning personnel must receive clearance from the Manchester Police Department." However, Police didn't know whether all local background checks had been completed.⁷
- Manchester, NH: A city health inspector found city dirty bathrooms at Memorial High School. Ad administration official said, "Memorial is dirty...It doesn't seem there's a problem that can't be rectified with a good mopping and regular cleaning, but the floors are dirty, some of the bathrooms were in need of disinfecting and cleaning and I don't know how long it will take them to catch up." The work was supposed to be done by ServiceMaster.⁸
- Palm Beach, FL: Palm Beach dumped their contract with ServiceMaster at a cost of about \$ 1.8 million. "Board members believe the company had promised to save \$ 3.8 million this year in personnel costs, plus \$ 1.9 million on material and supplies. And they aren't happy with reports from principals of dirty cafeteria floors and classrooms. When they campaigned for the job, ServiceMaster officials created unrealistic expectations for their company...Principals expected dramatically cleaner schools, and they didn't get them. Their contract requires them to pay ServiceMaster for the equipment that the Illinois-based company brought to Palm Beach County, if the board wants to keep it, and the cost will be \$ 1.2 million. Also, they will have to pay for ServiceMaster's software, called MAXIMO, that handles work orders. It will cost \$ 145,000."⁹

⁵ "LA Delegation," *The Advocate*, 5/13/96.

⁶ "Beach schools to cancel custodial contract," *The Virginian Pilot*, 8/17/94

⁷ "Janitors Face Close Scrutiny. School's Restrooms Pose Health Risk. Man Claiming To Be Wiseman Says He Wouldn't Harm a Kid," *The Union Leader*, 9/17/94

⁸ "Janitors Face Close Scrutiny. School's Restrooms Pose Health Risk. Man Claiming To Be Wiseman Says He Wouldn't Harm a Kid," *The Union Leader*, 9/17/94

⁹ "Janitorial work still flunks out; Cleanliness not up, school survey shows," *Florida Times Union*, 5/15/1997.