

CITY OF NEW YORK  
THE SPECIAL COMMISSIONER OF INVESTIGATION  
FOR THE NEW YORK CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

**ED STANCIK**  
SPECIAL COMMISSIONER

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO IMPROPRIETIES IN THE  
C-30 SELECTION PROCESS OF  
SHARON GORDON AS PRINCIPAL OF PS 397K**

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## ALLEGATIONS

On December 22, 1992, Bess Reynolds, the superintendent of District 17 in Brooklyn, forwarded information to this Office that the appointment of Sharon Gordon as principal of PS 397 had been rigged. Reynolds stated that Gordon was provided with interview questions before her interview at the first level of a three-tier selection process. Reynolds further alleged that Gordon's appointment was part of a deal whereby her becoming principal was contingent upon Francis Lippette being appointed assistant principal at the school.

### Background

When the former principal of PS 397 announced in May 1991 that she would be retiring in June, the parents on the Parent Teacher Association ("PTA") recommended to the superintendent that Sharon Gordon be assigned interim acting principal pending the official selection process, which was to commence in September 1991. This process, governed by Chancellor's Regulation C-30, provides for three levels of screening designed to select the best candidate based on the considered opinions of a "screening committee" of parents and teachers at the school, the superintendent and, lastly, the community school board.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>At Level I, the screening committee, composed of parents and teachers at the school, interviews applicants and selects a minimum of five for recommendation to the superintendent. At

Sharon Gordon was among the candidates selected for an interview before the Level I screening committee in February 1992. She emerged as the committee's first choice. Her name was accordingly forwarded together with those of four others' to the superintendent on February 12. After a successful interview with the superintendent, she was finally appointed principal by the community school board on May 20, 1992.

In September 1991, the PTA parents recommended Francis Lippette as interim acting assistant principal pending the assistant principal selection process, which did not begin until September 1992. However, this process was halted before Level I was completed by former Chancellor Fernandez in April 1993 due to alleged improprieties that are the subject of this investigation.

#### Improprieties Reported To Superintendent Bess Reynolds

Bess Reynolds told our Office that she first received allegations that Gordon had been given the interview questions in advance of her Level I interview from three parents in November 1992. The parents further alleged that Gordon had been given the

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Level II, the superintendent selects two of these five for recommendation to the community school board. Lastly, at Level III, the board votes on the final appointment.

questions on condition that she support Lippette as assistant principal.

Reynolds said she discounted the information because of the palpable animosity between the three parents, all staunch supporters of Francis Lippette, and Sharon Gordon. As Reynolds suggested, and as is clear from our findings, the parents' disclosure about the C-30 improprieties was at least partly in retaliation for Gordon's attempts to transfer Lippette from PS 397.<sup>2</sup>

On December 4, 1992, Reynolds met privately with Gordon to discuss the apparent lack of leadership afflicting PS 397. Although Gordon admitted that her differences with Lippette and the consequent parental hostility towards her impeded her from effectively running the school,<sup>3</sup> she never mentioned any impropriety in her selection process. Reynolds did not ask.

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<sup>2</sup>On October 30, 1992, Gordon formally requested Reynolds to have Lippette immediately removed from PS 397. Gordon claimed that she was a threat to the school and was causing "great friction between parents and staff." Her request was denied.

<sup>3</sup>Symptomatic of this tension, one parent, Hattie Washington, assaulted Gordon in her office in October 1992, causing her to suffer a cornea abrasion. Gordon alleged to our Office that Ms. Washington strongly supported Lippette. Adding to the school administrative problems, the parents, a large number of whom supported Lippette, were generally hostile to the teachers, the majority of whom supported Gordon.

On December 16, 1992, Reynolds heard the same allegations that had been made by the three parents from Board member Agnes Green. At this, she called a meeting on December 16 with Francis Hagler, president of the PTA, who had allegedly given Gordon the questions, and Gordon, among others. Confronted with the allegations, Hagler and Gordon admitted that Hagler had given Gordon the interview questions before the interview. Reynolds stated that there was some discrepancy about the number of questions that were actually given to Gordon.

### **FINDINGS**

#### Gordon's Sneak Preview of the Interview Questions

Hagler, a member of Gordon's screening committee, admitted to our Office that, about one week before Gordon was scheduled to be interviewed on February 6, she typed the six questions that the screening committee had decided to ask every candidate. When Gordon was alone in her office, she walked in, handed her the questions and told her, "These are the questions you're gonna be asked at the interview." Hagler testified that Gordon gratefully responded, "Thank you Miss Hagler." Gordon then placed the sheets under a file folder on her desk.

Hagler explained that she and about five PTA parents<sup>4</sup> had decided in the spring of 1991, before the C-30 process had begun, to support Gordon and Lippette for principal and assistant principal, respectively. She and these same parents then volunteered for and were selected to sit on the screening committee for principal in September 1991. Although virtually the entire screening committee backed Gordon, Hagler nevertheless decided at the last minute to show her the questions in advance to guarantee her success at Level I -- since emerging among the top five at Level I was critical to appointment. Hagler said she did not tell Gordon that she would be giving her the questions and consulted only one of the screening committee parents, Loreen Howard, about it. Howard, however, denied this.

Gordon admitted receiving the questions, but painted a picture of herself as caught in the middle of a plot she knew nothing about and of which she wanted no part. She said that, sometime before her interview, Hagler walked into her office, handed her two folded sheets of paper, told her to take them home and then walked out without saying what the sheets contained. Gordon claimed she did not ask or look at the sheets. She simply

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<sup>4</sup>Hagler said that these parents included Elsa Caines, Norma Moore and Loreen Howard, among others. They, however, denied meeting with Hagler.

placed the papers, without unfolding them, underneath a file on her desk.

Gordon testified that it was not until she arrived home later that evening and opened her mail that she saw that the sheets were a list of interview questions. No sooner did she realize this, than she threw them out in her waste basket without finishing to read them because she "knew it was wrong to have them first of all." Gordon further testified that she was so upset she had "pangs." However, she never confronted Hagler and never disclosed the wrongdoing to any authority until questioned by Bess Reynolds ten months later.

We find it hard to believe that Gordon was an unwitting and unwilling recipient of the interview questions and that she did not read them. The fact that Gordon immediately placed the interview questions underneath a file folder suggests that she was aware of their contents and wanted to conceal them. Moreover, if Gordon did not want any part of this wrongdoing, it is hard to understand why she did not confront Haggler about it.

Our investigation did not resolve the different descriptions that Hagler and Gordon provided of the questions. Hagler testified that she gave Gordon a single sheet containing only six

typed questions. Gordon described receiving two sheets, stapled in the left-hand corner, with between 15 and 20 typed questions.

Our Office obtained a copy of a list of interview questions for the PS 397 principal selection process from a file in the District 17 Office. The list contained 15 questions typed on two pages, stapled in the left-hand corner. The six questions asked at the interviews were circled. Gordon testified that the list we obtained from the file was similar to what Hagler had given her. Gordon could not, however, recall whether any questions were circled on the sheets she received. Hagler maintained that the list we obtained was merely a preliminary set of questions from which the screening committee chose the final six.

Regardless which set of questions were given to Gordon, the important point for this investigation is that it is evident that Gordon received the six questions actually asked at the interview. A copy of the list of questions we obtained from the file is attached as Exhibit 1.

#### Deal to Support Lippette In Return For Parental Backing

Hagler testified that, shortly after the previous principal announced in May 1991 that she would be retiring from PS 397,



Hagler and a handful of parents tentatively decided to support Gordon and Lippette provided they could work together. As Hagler and Gordon attest, in District 17, parents play a pivotal role in supervisory appointments. Hagler is their undisputed leader.<sup>5</sup> Hagler also explained that, before recommending prospective candidates for supervisory positions at the same school, she always ensures that they can work together.

Hagler testified that, when she asked Gordon whether she could work with Lippette, she unequivocally assured her that she could.<sup>6</sup> On this basis, Hagler solicited the support of the PTA on her behalf.

Hagler told our Office that, if Gordon had said she could not work with Lippette, she and the parents would have chosen to support someone else as principal because they were more

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<sup>5</sup> Loreen Howard and Norman Moore both testified that Hagler dominates the school and runs the PTA in dictatorial fashion. They agreed that most decisions are made by Hagler and a few select parents behind closed doors. Hagler then presents decisions to the PTA, which usually simply agrees with what has been decided. Howard explained that Hagler is able to control the PTA because most parents are of Caribbean origin and are unfamiliar with the educational system. Other parents, she said, are illegal aliens who are afraid to speak out.

<sup>6</sup>The evidence suggests that it was only after her permanent appointment that Gordon began to clash with Lippette. In February 1992, Hagler and the screening committee parents had only positive comments about Gordon's working relationship with Lippette.

committed to Lippette's candidacy than to Gordon's. Gordon confirmed that this was general knowledge.

However, we uncovered no evidence that Gordon made a deal to help Lippette become assistant principal in return for Hagler's and the parents' backing. Although Gordon was to be a member of the screening committee for assistant principal,<sup>7</sup> Hagler and the parents did not ask her to help Lippette in any way. Nor did Gordon promise to promote Lippette. Indeed, as Hagler explained, there was little Gordon could have done: a core of six parents who actively supported Lippette volunteered for and were selected to sit on the screening committee for assistant principal. They had the overwhelming majority of votes on the committee.<sup>8</sup> As Hagler put it, "We [the parents] didn't even worry about Sharon Gordon's one vote. Under the new C-30, parents have more power now than they ever had."

We do not therefore find that Gordon entered an illicit deal to secure parental support. Nor do we find that Hagler was wrong to ask Gordon whether she could work with Lippette before backing her. Ensuring harmony between prospective supervisors at the same school is common sense.

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<sup>7</sup>Under C-30, Gordon was to sit on Lippette's screening committee as the representative of the CSA ("Council of Supervisors and Administrators").

<sup>8</sup>The parents had six votes; the teachers, two; and the CSA, one.

Francis Lippette

Our findings additionally indicate that at least one of the parents on Lippette's screening committee, Elsa Caines, was considering giving the interview questions to Lippette before her Level I interview. By her own admission, Caines told Gordon in September/October 1992, "The same way I heard you got the questions, Ms. Lippette will get the questions. What's good for one is good for the other."<sup>9</sup> This was confirmed by Gordon and Loreen Howard, who overheard it.

Although Caines maintained that she was angry at Gordon and had no intention of actually giving Lippette the questions, her statement is cause for concern in light of the improprieties uncovered in Gordon's process. Moreover, the same core of parents who comprised Gordon's screening committee were also members of Lippette's committee.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Caines disavowed any direct knowledge about Gordon's receiving the questions. She said she heard about it from Loreen Howard and Norma Moore, another parent. However, Howard and Moore denied discussing the matter with Caines.

<sup>10</sup>During the course of our investigation we received numerous complaints about the lack of leadership at PS 397. Gordon said that a handful of especially hostile parents, including Elsa Caines and Hagler, interfere with school administration. She said they were encouraged by Lippette. Loreen Howard confirmed that the school could not function because Caines, Hagler and others had "taken over." Howard added that these parents

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Regardless whether Gordon read the interview questions, as the acting principal, her failure to report the wrongdoing cannot be excused. Gordon's explanation that she "didn't want to get involved with the hassles of what might come out of it" is no excuse. As the head of the school, she ought to have realized that giving questions in advance to one candidate seriously undermined the integrity of the C-30 selection process. However, instead of immediately exposing it, Gordon chose to keep quiet about the matter until confronted by Bess Reynolds over ten months later in December 1992.

Based on all the foregoing findings we recommend that the selection process for principal and assistant principal be redone under appropriate supervision and that the respective Level I screening committees be reformulated. We also recommend that Francis Hagler and Elsa Caines be disqualified from screening

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regularly curse at teachers, preventing them from doing their jobs. Norma Moore similarly described the chaos created by these parents, including Elsa Caines, who give orders to teachers. Howard and Moore attribute the plunge in PS 397's ranking in math and reading scores -- from 6th in the district in 1989-90 to 13th in 1991-92 -- to the paralysis in administration and lack of leadership.

committee membership.

We further suggest disciplinary action against Gordon for her failure to report the breach in her C-30 process. Lastly, it is our recommendation that appropriate steps be taken to address the lack of leadership and administrative difficulties at PS 397.