

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **The curious case of John Q. Porter**

by Wayne Goldstein

To many in this county, the name John Q. Porter may be no more recognizable to them than John Q. Public, although Mr. Porter has had and continues to have an extremely interesting life compared to Mr. Public. 2000 was a big year for Mr. Porter. In August 2000, 400 guests watched as he was chosen for a second term as chairman of the Chamber Workforce Corporation's (CWC), a merger of the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce and the county Workforce Development Corp., a job training agency. Problems in the Chamber organization before the merger had become more serious after the merger took place in June 1999, a few months before Mr. Porter first took the helm of CWC. These problems then became so severe that the county government stepped in and broke up the merger in October 2001, taking charge of the job training agency itself, shortly after Mr. Porter completed his second term.

In March 2000, Mr. Porter was hired by Superintendent Weast as interim head of the schools' Office of Global Access Technology (OGAT) after his predecessor was fired because a \$4 million computerized student information system did not work properly. Weast was so pleased with Mr. Porter's performance that he soon made him the permanent chief information officer of OGAT. In July 2004, Weast also made him the new deputy superintendent for strategic technologies and accountability.

Events continued to go very well for Mr. Porter, such that on April 26, 2007, it was announced: "The Oklahoma City Public Schools (OKCPS) has successfully concluded its national search for a new superintendent with the selection today of John Q. Porter, an accomplished national leader recognized for his breakthrough initiatives in the use of technology to transform student learning, improve academic performance and increase accountability." Cliff Hudson, Chairman of the OKCPS Board of Education, stated: "John is the right person at the right time and his broad experience in law, business and education will be of great value in his new position with our district."

Mr. Porter started his new job on July 2, 2007. Barely six months later, on January 7, 2008: "After a two-hour executive session, the Oklahoma City school board voted to suspend its superintendent immediately with pay pending an investigation into accusations against him. The board voted to appoint [an] acting superintendent until an open hearing is held on Feb. 6. ...The allegations include that Dr. John Q. Porter improperly agreed to a \$365,000 contract for the school district without getting bids. [He] also took about \$2,400 from the school district's activity fund for personal expenses and was reimbursed about \$5,000 for personal air travel."

Apparently, on the morning of the January 7th School Board meeting, Mr. Porter hired an attorney who went to court to try to get an injunction to stop the meeting. The judge denied the request. On January 10, School Board Chair Hudson said "he would resign his position for the greater good of the community and children of the District if Superintendent Porter would do likewise."

There are a total of 21 allegations of improper behavior. The most serious one concerns the \$365,000 no-bid contract made with Wireless Generation. It turns out that Mr. Porter, in his years at MCPS, helped to develop a partnership with this company. The Oct. 18, 2004 issue of "The [MCPS] Bulletin" stated: "A private company has partnered with MCPS to develop a product that can be sold nationally to other school systems." The June 13, 2005 issue stated: "MCPS and Wireless Generation, leading provider of handheld computer software used by teachers to perform reading assessments, have partnered to develop mCLASS: Reading 3D software. The new product enables teachers to use a handheld computer to administer the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) and a set of measures from the MCPS Assessment Program in Primary Reading..."

According to BOE minutes, \$1,550,000 was approved by the BOE for Wireless Generation between July 2004 and April 2006 for "Software for Automating DIBELS and Running Recording Assessment" and "Subscription Fee for Automated Reading Assessments". The January 27, 2005 BOE minutes state: "Mr. Abrams wanted to know if there were other areas for Entrepreneurial Activities, such as DIBELS. Mr. Porter replied that hand-held and tablet personnel computers have applications to be marketed to other school systems. Also, staff is developing agreements for such purchases. Dr. Weast pointed out that the professional growth systems are another intellectual property that could be sold. Mr. Abrams pointed out that in the Entrepreneurial Activities the strength is the educational component, but the weakness is in marketing. He wanted to see something on that area in the next budget. The best performance measure is profit, and he did not see any reference in the budget."

Apparently, people in Oklahoma feel differently about such arrangements for their school system. A diligent reporter got memos written in 2005 by two of our Councilmembers questioning the lack of an MCPS policy for royalties from public-private partnerships even as MCPS moved forward, with the BOE's blessing, and arranged to get them. On January 8, Mr. Porter had defended himself against most of the allegations, including stating: "I have used the Wireless Generation program before when I served as Associate/Deputy Superintendent in Montgomery County, Maryland. There is no other vendor that sells Wireless Generation's mCLASS:DIBELS assessment program..."

An educational website webmaster in Texas found information about its arrangement with MCPS on Wireless Generation's website. I found this: "Montgomery County Public Schools Announces Partnership With Innovative Technology Company Providing Handheld Solutions for Teachers... As a co-developer of the software, MCPS will benefit on several fronts. The district will receive a discount on subscription fees for the right to use the software to assess its students. In addition, MCPS also will receive royalties on all sales of the software to other school districts nationwide." The Texan wondered: "Even more interesting is the fact that in John Porter's responses to the allegations 'released a few hours ago' he does not mention the 'unique collaboration' in which presumably he would have at least some contribution/participation given his position at MCPS as its chief information officer."

What the people of Oklahoma City may not yet know, and what the people here may have either forgotten or never known, is why Mr. Porter was brought in by Weast and why he was chairman of the CWC for two years. In a 2002 interview, Mr. Porter talked about his business, called Spectrum International, Inc. "[Q.] How did the Montgomery County schools position come about? [A.] Spectrum had done work for state, local and federal government agencies in the past, and one of our key areas is education. We've done work for a variety of school districts, Baltimore City, Prince George's County, Washington, D.C., and Montgomery County for a number of years, in a variety of technology consulting areas. It was from that I was asked two years ago to come in, first with my staff to directly consult in a number of areas, then after that for me to come in as a consultant. Then after asking me to do an assessment and do a strategic plan, they asked me to come and carry out that strategic plan as the chief information officer."

What is most curious is what relationship Mr. Porter has had with his business since he went to work full-time for MCPS and then for OKCPS. Spectrum is listed as having had a federal contract worth \$362,086 to be completed around 7/11/04. Mr. Porter is listed as the "Point of Contact." For FY 2006-07, he is listed on the county chamber website as "Owner, Spectrum International, Inc." On Spectrum's website this week is this: "The K-12 Education Consulting Practice of Spectrum International, Incorporated (Spectrum) specializes in working with public school systems to identify, acquire, manage, develop and deploy their information technology resources. With a focus on the vision, mission and goals of school systems, Spectrum assists those organizations with the development of effective strategies, systems and implementation plans that lead to operational efficiency and support educational initiatives."

"Having worked side by side with administrators and educators in some of the largest public school systems in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, Spectrum has emerged as a leader in understanding the unique requirements and challenges facing K-12 educational organizations. The services of our consulting team complement the technology management capabilities of the school systems, and provide their IT managers with valuable support and expertise.

"We have an in depth familiarity with the culture and challenges of public school systems, and understand how the appropriate application of technology and best practices in an educational setting can greatly enhance the learning process and improve organizational efficiency. We realize that technology plays a dual role in the educational environment: it must support instructional activities, as well as support administrative operations... We are proud of the fact that we have been able to assist public school systems with the implementation of effective technology strategies and business practices to fulfill their educational mission and become better-run enterprises."

Mr. Porter is listed as the resident agent in Maryland for Spectrum. I have no evidence that Mr. Porter did Spectrum business with MCPS once he became a full-time employee. But even if he did, BOE Regulation GCA-RA allows the following: "Supplies, equipment, or materials produced by an employee during or prior to employment by [MCPS], except as stated in item 2 below, may be purchased by [MCPS] on the same basis as any other item, provided the employee-produced supplies, equipment, or materials are selected and approved for procurement in compliance with established procedure. The fact that the item was produced by said employee shall not be considered for or against its selection... 2. In a situation where the activity is performed partially on private and partially on public time, the specific arrangement will be approved in advance by the superintendent of schools."

I don't know what rules OKCPS has about a full-time employee also running a business at the same time and doing business with OKCPS, but it should be interesting to find out. 2008 also looks to be a big year for Mr. Porter, especially on February 6.