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### Hanna becomes whistle-blower

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*(Photo: Leon County Schools)*

Rocky Hanna, a Leon County school administrator, has notified the district that he is a whistle-blower under Florida statutes, according to a letter obtained by the Tallahassee Democrat.

The letter, which was hand-delivered Wednesday to school officials, states that Hanna, a divisional director and former principal of Leon High School, is reporting matters involving the misspending of taxpayer dollars. The letter was addressed to Superintendent Jackie Pons.

“As you are aware,” Hanna says in the letter, “I have already reported these matters to the FBI and verbally to you in January 2014 when we met in your office.”

He goes on to say in the half-page letter that, “I have reason to believe that monies that should have been designated for students and other school district related functions have been misspent. I also have reason to believe that the competitive bidding laws have been violated based on materials that were provided to me.

“For example, the Griffin (Middle School) project was to have been competitively bid and after your alleged dissatisfaction with the results, you allegedly split the bids into three parts just under \$2,000,000 each which appears to circumvent state laws.”

Tallahassee attorney Marie Mattox, who is representing Hanna along with Tallahassee attorney Tim Jansen, said Hanna probably already had whistle-blower status after meeting with Pons in January and disclosing his concerns. With the filing of the letter, he officially is a whistle-blower and is protected against workplace retaliation.

“What this means is that he has the protections of the whistle-blower statute, meaning they cannot fire him in retaliation for making the disclosures that he made. And what this does is it brings it to the forefront and it shows Jackie Pons I’m the one who is asking you to make corrections,” Mattox said, referring to Hanna. “I’m the one who has brought this to the attention of the authorities and I’ve brought it to your attention. And it’s now up to you to take action to correct the problem.”

Hanna's letter came the same week the Democrat detailed allegations against Pons and the School Board contained in an anonymous letter that was delivered to the FBI, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and other agencies about major school-construction work that was divided into smaller projects to avoid competitive bidding since 2010.

The school district issued a statement Thursday night confirming receipt of the whistle-blower letter.

"As noted in a previous statement, the district began investigating the allegations contained in the notebook in December 2013, a month before Mr. Hanna claims he verbally reported it to the superintendent," the statement says. "Mr. Hanna's letter and the facts surrounding it are being reviewed. He will have the full benefit of whatever protections the law provides."

This isn't the first time Hanna and Pons have clashed. In June 2012, Pons moved Hanna, the popular principal at Leon High, to an administration job as part of a shakeup that included four other principals. Hanna's move to a job as divisional director prompted protests from parents of Leon High students and others.

The projects in question involved new school wings, HVAC work and other upgrades at Gilchrist Elementary School, Gretchen Everhart School, Griffin Middle School, Kate Sullivan Elementary School, Killlearn Lakes Elementary School and Richards High School. Questions also have been raised about a proposed gym project at Ghazvini Learning Center, an alternative school, that has since been put on hold. The district has awarded contracts totaling nearly \$500,000 on the project to draw up architectural plans and replace unsuitable soils, though no building construction has begun.

The contracts were handed to vendors including Baycrest Corporation, Culpepper Construction, Childers Construction, LLT Building Corporation, Premier Construction, Pro-Steel Building, RAM Construction & Development, Southland Contracting, all of whom gave to Pons' 2012 campaign. The donations came in the form of multiple \$500 checks from the companies or their principals, and in many cases, both. Such donations are legal as long as they weren't

given in return for favors.

Mattox said Hanna did not compile the information in the anonymous report — something school administrators asserted earlier this week.

“All Rocky did was somebody gave him information and that information he felt needed to be disclosed,” she said. “And that’s what happened. He got information provided to him and that information, the allegations in those papers, were so serious that he said some investigation needs to be made. He did not confirm them; he did nothing other than to bring them to the attention of the authorities.”

The Florida Legislature passed a whistle-blower’s law with the express intent to “prevent agencies or independent contractors from taking retaliatory action against an employee who reports to an appropriate agency violations of law.”

The employee is required to report a violation of law to an agency or entity that has the power to investigate the allegations. The employer, in this case the school district, is prohibited from firing or disciplining the employee who discloses the information. The district may still fire an employee if it’s for reasons other than the whistle-blower actions.

If Hanna thinks he’s subject to adverse actions he can file a complaint with the state’s Commission on Human Relations and file a lawsuit charging he was harmed in violation of the law and seek reinstatement and damages. The school district policy on whistle-blowers mirrors the state statute.

Politics and Policy Editor Paul Flemming contributed to this story.

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