



## Former state education official files whistle blower suit



Ty Tagami - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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Ben Gray/BEN GRAY / AJC

February 2, 2007, ATLANTA -- Sen. Dan Weber, R-Dunwoody, (left) and Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle shake hands after Cagle's charter school system bill, which Weber carried in the Senate, passed the chamber. BEN GRAY / AJC STAFF

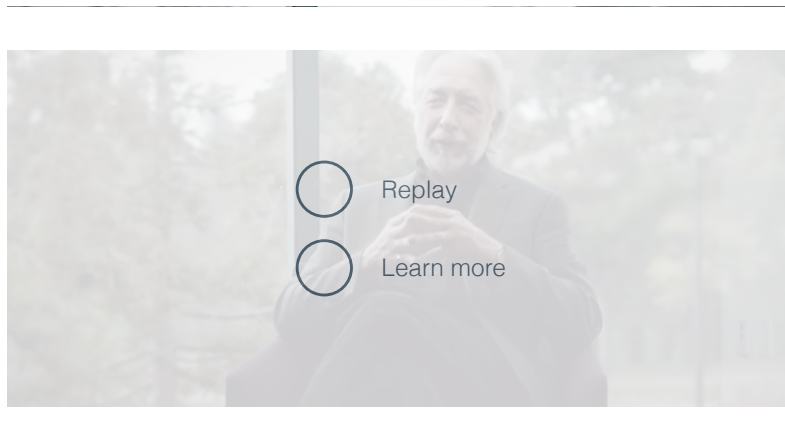
A former Georgia education official claims in a whistle blower lawsuit that she was forced out of the state Department of Education after she pushed back against a lobbyist who was allowed to draft policies she considered to be illegal.

Margo DeLaune claims in Fulton County Superior Court that state Superintendent Richard Woods bowed to pressure from Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle and Dan Weber, a former state senator-turned lobbyist. She claims she was an obstacle to their plans to relax restrictions on the use of federal “Title 1” dollars intended to help educate students from low-income households.

The lawsuit filed March 30 against the Georgia Department of Education, which Woods was elected to lead, says Weber suggested it was OK to mix federal poverty dollars with other state and local money and then spend it on, say, flowers and lawn care.



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“Under Weber’s policies, there would be no control to stop the misuse of Title 1 funds meant to help underprivileged children for non-education expenses like landscaping,” the lawsuit says.

Woods’ office would not respond to the accusation that DeLaune resigned under duress, but did acknowledge that his agency was overhauling the funding policies described in the lawsuit. DeLaune left the district in June 2016.

Federal law encourages “consolidation” of federal, state and local educational dollars and Georgia had been talking with the U.S. Department of Education about the plans that Weber helped develop, state education spokesman Matt Cardoza said. The federal government didn’t sign off on them, but their response was encouraging, he said. “Nobody felt like we couldn’t move forward with it,” Cardoza said.

The agency has embarked on a pilot program with three school districts and a charter school. None were in metro Atlanta, but a second wave of 15 school districts will include Atlanta Public Schools, the Cobb County School District and Marietta City Schools, said Weber, who has a contract with the state in connection with the policy development. In addition to his role as a lobbyist, Weber is executive director of the Georgia Charter System Foundation, which represents school districts that have signed “flexibility” contracts with the state education agency, and those systems have an interest in easing the restrictions on use of federal dollars, he said.

As a lawmaker, Weber helped pass the charter system law, and Cagle is a strong supporter of it. The law waives state mandates for things like maximum student-teacher ratios or minimum annual school calendar days in school districts that sign “accountability” contracts that emphasize “school-based leadership” and “decision-making.”

Cagle's office had no comment. His general counsel, Irene Munn, is identified in the lawsuit as having lobbied Woods to fire DeLaune "on account of her repeated objections to Weber's control over the pilot program." Munn said in a statement that it is "inappropriate" to comment on pending litigation or personnel issues.

Neither DeLaune, who moved to Washington state, nor her attorney, Kimberly Worth, could be reached for comment.

Woods' agency created the position of [Director of Consolidated Federal Initiatives](#) and filled it in August, and DeLaune's lawsuit claims this was done at Weber's request, in an effort to shift oversight over federal funds away from DeLaune, marginalizing her. She claims a toxic work environment forced her to seek medical treatment for emotional and physical distress, and she is seeking financial recompense.

Weber acknowledged that DeLaune opposed his proposals but said he barely knew her and "never encouraged Richard Woods to terminate her."

Weber said federal policy shifted but DeLaune did not. He acknowledged that he said at planning meetings that federal funds for poor kids could be merged with other dollars and spent on landscaping, and he cited federal guidelines that allow combining of federal education funds and local landscaping funds. However, [those guidelines](#) require that state and local dollars cover the landscaping costs.

However, he said that is not what Georgia ultimately decided to do. The state, instead, has chosen a more conservative course, consolidating only those dollars targeted in four areas: instruction, pupil services, improvement of instructional services and educational media services.

"We're trying to be cautious and wise in the way we're doing this," he said.

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