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## **Grier Stops Accepting Free Trips**

**Bruce Buchanan**

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Guilford County Schools Superintendent Terry Grier received \$2,000 and a trip to California - indirectly paid for by companies that want to do business with the school system.

Grier is paid \$182,000 annually. Grier's contract, which he signed when joining the district in 2000, lets him do outside consulting on his own time but requires him to comply with the board's conflict-of-interest policy. That policy states: "Employees of the school system shall not accept gifts from any person or groups desiring or doing business with the school system, except for nominally valued instructional products or advertising items which are widely distributed."

Grier was among nearly 100 superintendents, and one of two from North Carolina, who attended the July Educational Research and Development Institute conference at a luxury resort in Rancho Mirage, Calif. There, the superintendents met for three days with representatives from companies who supply products and services to school systems.

Grier said Monday he never steered any companies to the district, nor did any vendors ask for the district's business. He said he has attended the institute's conferences for more than 12 years - always using his vacation time - and has found them helpful in professional development. However, he said he will not attend future conferences to avoid any unintended controversy: "I do not want to leave any room for anyone to question my integrity."

These conferences are put together by the Educational Research and Development Institute, a private, Nebraska-based company. The vendor companies pay the institute, which in turn pays the superintendents \$2,000 each to attend.

This arrangement, Grier said, does not violate the letter or spirit of the conflict-of-interest policy: "I get paid by ERDI, not by any company they do business with."

The Institute's Web site states, "Each company receives a private three-hour panel with five educators. The agenda is determined by the company and can address any issue."

The superintendents advise companies on how to improve the goods and services they offer school systems. That's where the \$2,000 consultant's fee comes in.

Grier said Monday that the superintendents perform valid, valuable services that help the companies, the school districts and the children they serve.

Coca-Cola began offering healthier drinks in school vending machines after consulting with superintendents at an institute conference, Grier said.

"You get to offer suggestions (on) how to make these products benefit children," Grier said. "I feel no obligation to arrange for them a visit to our district."

In fact, he said, he has little input into purchasing. Those decisions are made either by department heads and principals or through open bidding.

The conference was featured recently in an article in The Dallas Morning News, which listed participants. On Aug. 3, after that article was published, Grier wrote the institute to say he no longer would participate in its conferences. He wrote that he is "very comfortable with the ethics of our working relationship" but is concerned that others may raise questions about its integrity.

District grandparent and Grier critic Carl Alexander forwarded a copy of the Dallas article to the News & Record. Alexander said he is troubled by Grier's participation in the conference, even if he did nothing improper.

"A manager should never put themselves in a position where there is even the appearance of a conflict of interest," he said.

By taking money to attend the conference, Grier left himself open to ethical questions, Alexander said.

Tom Sobol, who teaches ethics to aspiring superintendents at Columbia University in New York, agreed that Grier erred.

"These are public school systems," Sobol said. "Going and getting paid for events like these doesn't improve trust with the public."

Contact Bruce Buchanan at 373-7078 or [bbuchanan@news-record.com](mailto:bbuchanan@news-record.com)