

March 11, 2004

## Schools' Top Lawyer Quits in Uproar Over Nepotism

By ELISSA GOOTMAN

The city Department of Education's top lawyer resigned yesterday, becoming the second casualty in a widening scandal over the hiring of a deputy chancellor's husband without the proper conflict-of-interest clearance.

The lawyer, Chad Vignola, announced he was stepping down last night, a day after Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein staunchly defended him. The deputy chancellor, Diana Lam, was forced to resign on Monday night.

The two resignations are an embarrassment for Mr. Klein and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg as they undertake the most ambitious overhaul of the city school system in more than 30 years. In gaining control of the schools two years ago, Mr. Bloomberg made a point of the need to root out corruption and patronage in the system. But in the last few days, he and the schools chancellor have found themselves on the defensive as the questionable actions of top education officials became public.

Mr. Klein has retreated twice since the release last Friday of a report concluding that Ms. Lam inappropriately sought to have her husband hired by the school system. At first, Mr. Klein said Ms. Lam had his full support. On Monday, after meeting with the mayor, he demanded her resignation. On Tuesday, he defended Mr. Vignola, who was accused in the report of trying to cover up the hiring of Ms. Lam's husband.

Last night, however, Mr. Klein issued a brief statement, saying he had accepted Mr. Vignola's resignation "with sadness."

Mr. Vignola issued a statement explaining that he did not want to "create any more needless distraction from our essential educational mission" and could not "allow a lack of public confidence to undercut the vital reform efforts currently under way."

In fact, the department was hoping to shift the agenda by pressing ahead with a news conference today on new schools. But it was unclear whether Mr. Vignola's resignation would put an end to the firestorm, in which even the actions of Mr. Klein himself - what he knew and when he knew it - have been questioned by city investigators. (Mr. Klein has said he put a stop to Ms. Lam's husband's employment as soon as he knew about it.)

Adversaries of the mayor seized upon the second resignation to criticize Mr. Bloomberg's handling of the education department, saying the system's integrity had been undermined. They urged the mayor to demand more transparency and accountability.

The teachers' union issued a statement calling Mr. Vignola's resignation "inevitable" in the wake of the report by Richard J. Condon, the special commissioner of investigation for the schools.

"The system has been shaken by the conduct outlined in the Condon report, and also by the soap-opera series of declarations of public confidence, followed shortly by the departure of the

officials involved," it said. "We now need a three-step process to restore the public's faith in the school system, create a series of checks and balances, and refocus the department on teaching and learning in our schools."

The report said Mr. Vignola told investigators he first learned that Ms. Lam's husband, Peter Plattes, had been hired as a regional instructional specialist on July 18, after the department's ethics officer notified him.

"Although he had two brief conversations with Lam, Vignola stated that he was unaware that Plattes had even applied for a job," the report said. Mr. Vignola, it said, told investigators that Ms. Lam had suggested her husband might be interested in a job and that he had responded that he did not foresee a problem, "but that there was a process that had to be followed because she could not supervise him."

Later, investigators said, Mr. Vignola suggested that reporters be told that Mr. Plattes was simply working as a volunteer, even though he had accepted the job, and started working, with the assumption he would earn \$102,000 a year.

"In Vignola's view, because Plattes's information had not been put into the payroll system, he was not an employee, even though he was offered the R.I.S. position, accepted the position, and was performing the duties associated with the position," the report found.

In fact, investigators said, Mr. Plattes did not yet receive a paycheck because his Social Security number was entered incorrectly - not because of any reservations about his employment. Mr. Plattes, who later sought employment as a teacher, again without clearance, was never paid.

After resigning, Ms. Lam said she had consulted with Mr. Vignola about her husband's job application and was given a "green light."

In an interview yesterday she elaborated, saying Mr. Vignola may have mentioned the Conflicts of Interest Board but never elaborated on the clearance procedure.

"I did not get good advice as to when exactly do you go to the conflicts board," she said. "Do you go before? Do you go during? Do you go after?"

Mr. Vignola declined to comment beyond his written statement yesterday. But on Tuesday, he said that he believed Mr. Condon's report exonerated him.

That day, the chancellor defended Mr. Vignola against a barrage of questions.

"From what I know, I feel confident that Mr. Vignola essentially gave the right legal advice to Diana Lam," Mr. Klein said. "Everything that I know gives me no reason to be concerned. I know Mr. Vignola. He's been at the department for quite a while. He's dealt with the issues of people who are related working together. Everything indicates to me that he would insist that there be a conflict-of-interest review before anyone could go forward. When he came to me and raised the issue about Mr. Plattes he looked entirely surprised to me."

Yesterday, Mr. Klein said he had asked Mr. Vignola to remain in his position through April.

Mr. Vignola, a former assistant United States Attorney, became general counsel to the schools chancellor in 1999 and was one of the few top officials to keep his job during Mr. Bloomberg's

overhaul. Before joining the department, he was deputy commissioner for operations and general counsel for the New York City Trade Waste Commission. He also served for several years in the city's Office of the Corporation Counsel.

*To Rich Gibson's Home Page*

## Chad Vignola

Vice President at new visions for public schools

Greater New York City Area

- Current**
- Vice President at new visions for public schools
  - vp school support at New Visions for Public Schools
  - VP at New Visions for Public Schools

- Past**
- Chief Operating Officer at New Leaders for New Schools
  - VP maybe, can't remember title at The Princeton Review

- Education**
- University of Pennsylvania - The Wharton School

**Connections** 41 connections

**Industry** Education Management

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## Chad Vignola's Experience

### Vice President

**new visions for public schools**

(Education Management industry)

Currently holds this position

### vp school support

**New Visions for Public Schools**

(Education Management industry)

2007 — Present (3 years )

### VP

**New Visions for Public Schools**

(Education Management industry)

2007 — Present (3 years )

### Chief Operating Officer

**New Leaders for New Schools**

(Education Management industry)

2006 — 2007 (1 year )

### VP maybe, can't remember title

**The Princeton Review**

(Education Management industry)

2004 — 2006 (2 years )

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## **Chad Vignola's Education**

**University of Pennsylvania - The Wharton School**

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