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North Side school effort called failure - District says consulting group not hitting its goals.

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Minneapolis public school officials plan to stop payment on a \$375,000 contract with an organization that they say has not fulfilled its pledge of working with students and parents in the North Side's most struggling schools.

The group, Community Standards Initiative (CSI), "has yet to meet its goals and ... is not on track to meet its obligations," said Stan Alleyne, a school district spokesman. "We will not pay them additional funds if they are unable to fulfill the terms of the contract."

School officials awarded the contract in May, without competitive bid, to CSI, a nonprofit organization run by community activists Al Flowers and Clarence Hightower. They got the contract after strong lobbying by DFL state Sens. Bobby Joe Champion and Jeff Hayden, who serves as deputy majority leader in the Senate.

One source said Hayden and Champion threatened to withhold state aid if Minneapolis school officials did not approve the contract.

Alleyne confirmed "we had members of the [local legislative] delegation that reached out to us, urging us to support the work of CSI."

Hayden said Thursday the idea that he and Champion bullied or threatened the school district is "inappropriate language to use."

The district's decision has created a clash with an organization run by two of the North Side's most well-known and politically connected community activists. Hightower is pastor of New Bethel Missionary Baptist Church and the executive director of the Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties.

School officials plan to meet with CSI officials later in September to discuss the contract.

Hayden said the district should not be premature in making statements about CSI's performance.

"I would hope the district is a willing partner to make this initiative a success," he said.

CSI formed to address the district's vast achievement gap for black students. Hightower is the registered leader of the organization, which he runs through his church. The organization has no website, office or phone number.

In the community, Flowers has been the public face of the organization. He is currently embroiled in an issue with the city after alleging misconduct during his arrest in July when police were checking on his daughter for violating the terms of her electronic home-monitoring. Flowers' attorney is Champion, one of the senators at the center of the controversy over CSI.

Hightower did not return several phone calls seeking comment. Flowers said he does not



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want to get "in the middle" of the district's allegations.

"We have a ton of kids that are failing and we have to work together to save the African-American kids," Flowers said.

In a quarterly summary, CSI acknowledged there have been struggles. "As with any implementation of a new program, we continued to encounter and address several road blocks and obstacles within each school," the summary said.

Started at the Legislature

This latest CSI contract actually got its start at the Capitol.

Hayden said Hightower and several others, including Flowers and Larry McKenzie, a North Side community leader and former basketball coach, asked **Hayden** to introduce a separate measure that would give CSI money to address the district's achievement gap between white and minority children.

During state budget negotiations in the spring of 2013, Champion and **Hayden** proposed to take a sliver of the district's state aid for the organization.

But **Hayden** said the district did not want to lose any funding, so school officials agreed to oversee the contract themselves.

At the time, school officials continued to raise concerns about the project.

The superintendent's leadership team repeatedly met with Hightower and others to craft a workable proposal.

Last November, the team made a recommendation to Superintendent Bernadeia Johnson to "not issue CSI a contract at this time," and instead offer them a chance to compete for the money.

"Significant concerns remain across the leadership team about the comprehensiveness and quality of proposed programming, and capacity of the CSI organization for delivering on the program," the document said. "There is no clear evidence that CSI can articulate or demonstrate what they will be doing in our schools, even with significant support from several MPS staff throughout the process."

But Johnson did not end the chance for a contract. Instead, the district in February spent \$30,000 to hire a program manager to help CSI create a concrete plan, something that district officials say is extremely rare.

"Throughout the process we expressed concerns about the large scope of work and the need for expertise from other governmental bodies and organizations," Alleyne said. "We realized the goals of CSI are ambitious, but we were hoping that the people and groups who are deeply connected to our communities could help us lead change and improvements."

CSI's job was to work with three schools, Lucy Laney, Bryn Mawr and Henry High School. Each month, for the next two years, CSI had specific goals to meet around community engagement, health and wellness, school intervention and youth development.

In May, CSI received its first payment of \$46,875. That month, the group was expected to conduct one after-school session at each of the three schools to recruit parents and students.

It was required to identify 15 students per school who needed mental health referrals, in addition to enrolling 100 students per school in conflict-resolution training, mental health services and youth development.

Each month thereafter, CSI has similar goals. The group was supposed to turn in monthly reports detailing its work. Only one report had been submitted as of Aug. 29, which it labeled a quarterly summary.

It details CSI's problems with accessing students at the three schools and the difficulty of enrolling kids at schools that did not have summer school programs.

CSI says it organized various community events and joined previously scheduled summer school activities to meet students and parents.

The group currently claims to have 63 students enrolled in its program, but the contract required 450 students by the end of August.

CSI has a scheduled payment for another \$46,000 in September. Alleyne said the district will not be issuing a payment unless CSI can prove it fulfilled the terms of the contract.

Money requested

CSI has asked the district for money every year since 2011. The group initially wanted more than \$300,000 in 2011 to establish values and "standards of behavior" in all 87 neighborhoods and reward those who modeled that behavior at home, in parks, schools and within the community.

In a presentation to the district, Flowers said the group would establish behavior standards of young people, then reward those who were modeling those behaviors.

Students who were positively contributing to the community or school would be given incentive from local businesses that had partnered with CSI.

"It didn't have the focus needed to award that kind of money," Alleyne said.

Nonetheless, the district awarded \$15,000 to CSI to develop and implement "a positive behavior incentive program for young people" in Minneapolis. CSI also received \$15,000 from the Park Board.

CSI was required to turn in bimonthly reports detailing its work and outcomes.

"Unfortunately we do not have any details or documentation from 2011," Alleyne said.

Rebecca Gagnon, one of the CSI's strongest advocates on the school board, said she is disappointed that the group has not met its goals.

"This is a really important piece to making our schools better. I hope that this is not the case," she said. "I hope there is some kind of miscommunication."

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Caption: Minneapolis public school officials plan to stop payment on a \$375,000 contract with an organization that they say has not fulfilled its pledge of working with students and parents in the North Side's most struggling schools. The group, Community Standards Initiative (CSI), "has yet to meet its goals and ... is not on track to meet its obligations," said Stan Alleyne, a school district spokesman. "We will not pay them additional funds if they are unable to fulfill the terms of the contract." School officials awarded the contract in May, without competitive bid, to CSI, a nonprofit organization run by community activists Al Flowers and Clarence Hightower. They got the contract after strong lobbying by DFL state Sens. Bobby Joe Champion and **Jeff Hayden**, who serves as deputy majority leader in the Senate.

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