

Schools spend \$130,000 without board's approval

By CHARLIE STOTT

Washington County school officials have awarded \$130,000 in non-bid contracts for testing programs over the past two years without Board of Education approval.

The contracts were given to three firms in Providence, Rhode Island headed by William F. Pepper on the advice of former assistant superintendent Paul Masem.

School Superintendent Claud E. Kitchens said Thursday the work was proposed "in small pieces." He added: "Quite frankly, if they had been put into one package, I would have carried it to the board."

Wayne Stouffer, the school system's budget director, said he knew of "no other consulting firm (that) has been paid that much over a two-year period."

Kitchens said he was notified of the total amount being paid to the Rhode Island firms last spring. "I was a little flabbergasted" by the amount, he said, but added that the school system never tried a testing program as large as the one Pepper helped organize.

Kitchens said he was satisfied that the money was "well spent." But he also said there is no way to determine if the school system got its money's worth.

Kitchens said the purchase of testing materials doesn't have to be determined by competitive bidding.

The Rhode Island firms helped set up new reading tests for elementary schools and a program designed to identify children for special education efforts. About \$100,000 of the total bill was paid with federal funds, while \$30,000 came from the school system's general operating budget.

The Rhode Island firms were recommended by Masem, who worked with them when he was a school official in Providence. "They had done similar work for us and when the board wanted to emphasize reading, I recommended them," said Masem, who is now an assistant superintendent in Montgomery County.

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Montgomery County's school system, headed by former Providence school official Charles Bernardo, has given the Rhode Island companies about \$34,000 worth of consulting work.

Kitchens said "I don't know that I could tell you why" the Rhode Island firms were selected here. "Mr. Masem recommended them to me and I accepted his recommendation," he said, adding that such a procedure is common in the purchase of instructional services.

Masem said he recommended the Rhode Island firms because of their "excellent work," but admitted that he didn't try to determine if any Maryland companies could do an equivalent job.

The Rhode Island firms began their Washington County work in February 1976, about six months after Masem joined the coun-

ty school system. The work continued until July 1977, about six months after Masem left for Montgomery County.

For the reading program, a series of tests were designed to keep track of what was taught and how much of that had been learned by the students.

The firms developed a computer program for testing and keeping track of the students' progress, sold manuals, testing materials and trained teachers in using the tests, according to accounting records.

These services and materials cost the county about \$105,000 in federal and local funds.

"There is no way we can know if we got the best program for the money," Kitchens said. "The only way to assess it is by the comments from principals and supervisors who work with it. They say they are more than pleased."

But the materials are no longer used in the schools. Kitchens said he decided that to cut

costs the county would produce its own testing materials based on what had been learned from the work done by Pepper's firm. He added, however, that he was satisfied with materials.

Kitchens said the only part of Pepper's work that had received a negative response was a training program for teachers. "Frankly, some of our teachers knew as much as some of the people that came in. Some were real good," he said was the word he received from teachers attending the sessions.

The special education program, costing about \$25,000, tested about 150 students and helped local staff diagnose problems. Once the needs of the students were identified, the consultants helped teachers set up appropriate programs for the handicapped children.

None of Pepper's firms are currently doing work for Washington County, according to Stouffer.

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