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An Editorial Jefferson Parish School Board can't shut out the public

It wasn't long ago that most Jefferson Parish School Board members ran for office promising transparency and accountability. So it's troubling that a majority of the board met with dozens of school principals last week behind closed doors and without prior public notice -- in violation of the state's open meetings law.

Jefferson Parish School Board member Mark Morgan

Board member Mark Morgan organized the meeting Wednesday at Thomas Jefferson High School in Gretna. Mr. Morgan and other officials said the recent leadership changes and budget constraints in the system have ignited worries among employees, and the session was intended to let principals share their concerns with board members.

But Mr. Morgan restricted who could attend, despite the presence of five of the nine board members -- which is a quorum under state law. Also present were board President Michael Delesdernier, Vice President Etta Licciardi and members Larry Dale and Ray St. Pierre. Their attendance required that the session be advertised at least 24 hours in advance and remain open to the public.

Instead, Mr. Morgan said he didn't want central office personnel there so the principals would speak candidly. He also raised issues about a reporter from The Times-Picayune being present. He asked the approximately 50 principals in attendance if they wanted the reporter to leave. When a few said they did, Mr. Morgan closed the meeting.

Whether the meeting was required to be open to the public was not up to the principals, Mr. Morgan or the other board members in attendance. The open meetings law is really not hard to understand. It says that "convening a quorum of a public body by the public body or by another public official to receive information regarding a matter over which the public body has supervision, control, jurisdiction or advisory power" qualifies as a meeting subject to the law's requirements.

Wednesday's session clearly met those parameters.

Mr. Morgan has shown a weak knowledge of and respect for transparency laws before, and he had no right to restrict attendance by anyone in the public or the press. The other board members who went along as Mr. Morgan closed the session should know better as well.

Some board members and board attorney Michael Fanning argued that the public can be kept out of assemblies attended by a quorum of the board as long as the session is an informal gathering and members avoid taking votes or discussing issues they will decide later.

But Wednesday's session was not an informal gathering. It was a meeting convened by a board member with some of the system's top employees to discuss important issues regarding public schools -- a matter of great public interest.

Board members can promise transparency until they are blue in the face. But their vows will ring hollow if they leave the public out when they have no right to do so.

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