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Legislative scholarship records sent to FBI;

reaction to sun-times story | Questions raised about student's address

By Dave McKinney and the Better Government Association

SPRINGFIELD - The State Board of Education has forwarded records about a questionable legislative scholarship awarded by state Rep. Dan Burke to the FBI and the General Assembly's ethics watchdog, an agency official said Friday.

The move came as a result of questions raised from a joint investigation last week by the Chicago Sun-Times and Better Government Association about a tuition waiver worth nearly $70,000 that Burke granted to the daughter of a former legislative secretary.

"There was a question raised about one of the students. I believe you raised the question about where they lived exactly and where they stated they lived. We saw that information, and we forwarded it to the General Assembly's inspector general as well as the FBI," state board spokesman Matt Vanover said.

Burke waived four years of college tuition at Southern Illinois University for Sarah Dowis between 2003 and 2008. Her mother is Burke's one-time legislative secretary in Springfield, Judy Dowis, who worked for him for a six-year stint ending in early 2003.

Under state law, legislative scholarship recipients must certify that they live within the awarding legislator's district. In Dowis' case, conflicting details exist about whether she really met that requirement.

Burke's office submitted paperwork on her behalf to the State Board of Education, listing her "permanent residence" as a small bungalow in the 5700 block of South Homan Avenue. She even registered to vote there in 2005, mid-way through her college career.

Neither she nor her family owns that property. Instead, it's home to the elderly parents of Burke's Chicago-based legislative secretary, Teresa Sanchez, whose mother told the Sun-Times and BGA that Sarah Dowis used to show up only occasionally.

Sarah Dowis also submitted to Burke's office a copy of a state identification card listing the South Homan address as her residence, but she didn't obtain that card until two days after getting her first tuition waiver from Burke in July 2004.

That residency claim does not square with the address Dowis gave either the secretary of state's office to obtain her driver's license or that she provided to Southern Illinois University on her admissions application.

Between 2000 and 2010, on her driver's license, she disclosed to Secretary of State Jesse White's office that her home address was in Downstate Chatham, more than 200 miles from the South Homan address. Her SIU application listed Downstate Divernon, as her home, which is where her mother lives.

Burke, the brother of Ald. Ed Burke (14th) and brother-in-law to state Supreme Court Justice Anne Burke, did not immediately respond to a message seeking comment about the new development.

The State Board's decision to turn the matter over to the FBI and Legislative Inspector General Thomas Homer marks the second time the agency has forwarded information about questionable legislative scholarships that have been the subject of reports in the Sun-Times.

Files were turned over to the same investigative authorities after the Sun-Times questioned the agency about state Sen. Martin Sandoval (D-Cicero), who awarded legislative scholarships to five students with different last names who listed the same home address on their tuition waiver paperwork.

The Sun-Times reported Wednesday that the bungalow at that address is owned by 14th Ward precinct captain and paid Sandoval campaign worker Rudolph Acosta Sr.

Voter and vehicle registrations raised questions about whether the students lived within Sandoval's district.

Sandoval blamed the matter on a pair of office staffers, whom he fired, and the State Board of Education for allowing the scholarships to be processed in apparent violation of state law.

Sandoval has since said he has hired a Chicago law firm to "conduct a comprehensive review of past procedures and implementation of the General Assembly scholarship program, both within my office and at the State Board of Education."

The state board has defended its handling of the waivers, noting the documents submitted to them by Sandoval's office for the students bore their signatures and his, along with notarizations that attested to the Acosta home being their "permanent address."