

Former lobbyist for charter schools will lobby for Duval Public Schools next

By Khristopher J. Brooks

Posted Oct 20, 2013 at 7:59 PM

John Sullivan has a talent for influencing state lawmakers that Duval County Superintendent Nikolai Vitti wants to use to his advantage.

Because of that, Duval County Public Schools hired Sullivan as its lobbyist in Tallahassee.

Sullivan, 29, comes to the district after spending the last two legislative sessions working for Florida Consortium of Public Charter Schools and the Florida Charter School Alliance.

Vitti said he hired Sullivan because “charter schools have had a lot of success moving legislation in their favor.”

“And when you look at someone like John, he was part of an organization that was successful. We’re hoping to leverage that experience and have John apply those skills to this job.”

Sullivan will be based in Tallahassee. His job includes attending education committee meetings, arranging sit-downs between lawmakers and School Board members as well as drafting language for upcoming bills that favor Duval schools.

Vitti said he hired Sullivan because the lobbyist is great at networking with lawmakers. Sullivan said he built his network of education committee members and legislative staff while still a student at Florida International University.

Before his charter school work, Sullivan was an intern for state Rep. Erik Fresen, a Miami Republican. Fresen chairs the House education appropriations subcommittee.

To be effective, Sullivan must build on the success that the district saw during the last legislative session, when Vitti helped convince lawmakers to pass a plan that allows students to earn a diploma from any of three different paths. Some of the other actions Vitti and the school board have wanted to influence the Legislature on include:

• Revising the high school graduation formula so students who receive special diplomas are counted in the school's graduation rate.

• Allowing school districts to make the final decision on approving charter school applications, a decision now made by the state.

• Requiring charter schools to have to meet the same class-size mandates as public schools.

Sullivan, who joined the Army after high school and had a tour in Iraq and Afghanistan, said the best way to influence legislation is to begin talking to lawmakers at the beginning of a bill, explaining to lawmakers how certain decisions can affect educators. That doesn't necessarily guarantee success, Sullivan said, but a lobbyist has a better chance at the beginning rather than waiting until the bill is on the floor for a full vote.

Vitti said hiring Sullivan is part of his larger plan to have lawmakers view Duval schools in a more favorable light.

Sullivan replaces the district's former lobbyist, Mike O'Farrell, who made \$90,000. Sullivan will be paid \$75,000.

In Sullivan's contract with the district, he can advocate for Duval schools only during the session.

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