

Brent Batten: Decisions, decisions. Mostly bad

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It's always fun and easy to play a game of "what if."

Well, in the case of last Tuesday's Collier County School Board meeting, not so much fun. But it's still easy.

There were twists and turns from the onset. Had things been done differently at any of them, the outcome could have been more palatable than the one that ultimately ensued, the abrupt firing of Superintendent Ray Baker and a hasty bid to replace him with Rockford, Ill., school chief Dennis Thompson.

Starting with Board Chairman Steve Donovan allowing the meeting to spiral out of control — the attorneys presenting the report on high school academic credit were forced to spend more than an hour on the first of their 11 points due to disjointed questioning from board members then sped through the remaining 10 in a matter of minutes — and ending with board member Richard Calabrese nominating an ally for interim superintendent to replace Baker not knowing the candidate is ineligible because he lives in Lee County, the meeting featured more bad decisions than a Lindsay Lohan weekend.

What if Baker and his top administrators had made sure all board members had the district's written response to the attorneys' report, known as the Hinshaw Report, well in advance of the 12:30 p.m. meeting? Handing it to critics Donovan, Calabrese and Linda Abbott, just as the session was starting, only furthered their aggravation with the superintendent and served as a microcosm of their concerns about Baker not being forthright.

Abbott correctly noted that the response could have been handed to board members at an executive session held Tuesday morning. Board member Kathleen Curatolo's contention that the executive session is limited in nature and only items on its agenda may legally be discussed rang hollow. Baker could have handed out pieces of paper five seconds before the meeting was convened or five seconds after it adjourned. The point is, all the board members were in one place, but the administration saw fit not to distribute its response.

What if the relatively new board majority had slow played their hand? The attorneys' presentation, known as the Hinshaw Report, could have been a means to bring Superintendent Baker in line. Baker pretty much had his way with the previous board. The implementation of the Hinshaw Report, which was done over Baker's objections, would have shown how well he could function when not calling the shots.

Calabrese has been seeking an independent audit of district finances. A positive experience with the Hinshaw Report — problems identified, steps taken to fix them — would have served as a model for that much more ambitious project.

What if the board had waited to get rid of Baker? If relations between the majority and Baker really were irreparable, what's the harm in keeping him around a few more weeks until his evaluation, scheduled for Aug. 16? The board could then inform Baker of its dissatisfaction. Firing Baker without notice is bound to bring a lawsuit. The legal expenses could be more than it would have cost to simply buy out Baker's contract.

Finally, what if the 10-hour broadcast of Tuesday's meeting could be packaged as a reality show? Maybe a soap opera, or a game show, would be the more appropriate genre.

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