

# Toronto Sun

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## School taxes at work?

### Dealing with strategy firm is a learning experience for trustees

By **MOIRA MACDONALD**

When Toronto District School Board trustee Josh Matlow arrived home late on March 10, he found an unusual piece of mail.

It was a letter from a lawyer representing Navigator Ltd., a private strategy firm. Navigator was recently approved by the TDSB to help it create "a public campaign" to get more money from the provincial government -- for up to \$50,000.

Matlow opposes this, saying he doesn't want to spend taxpayers' money to get more taxpayers' money.

That day, he had been quoted in the Toronto Star saying Navigator's plan, discussed at a private board session, included holding a plebiscite in Toronto "to create a crisis in education." The letter advised him to contact the Star and withdraw his comments or face a libel suit.

Matlow did retract his comments. But he tells me he did it because there was no way he could prove what was said, since it was in a closed meeting. So much for the Liberal government's promise to make school board meetings more open.

"I'd much rather see this contract scrapped than prove I'm right," Matlow told me.

Navigator has also been doing business with the Toronto Catholic District School Board, and is heading up a similar campaign to the TDSB's, also for \$50,000. Trustee Maria Rizzo is one of only two trustees there who have consistently opposed the deals, for the same reason as Matlow.

After criticizing the deal, the process and Navigator on a local radio show in January, 2005, Rizzo says she got a letter from an old NDP friend, Robin Sears, who she didn't realize also worked for Navigator. Rizzo says she was asked to withdraw her statements and that "failure to do so will have serious consequences." (Sears told me he doesn't remember a letter and doesn't believe he made any legal threats, but does remember asking Rizzo to make a retraction.) And so she did.

Navigator first started doing business with the Catholic board with a campaign to tackle declining enrolment. What began as an initial \$100,000 spending approval for Navigator to survey parents two years ago, has blossomed to more than \$1 million, with costs for billboard ads and telephone solicitations for a student recruitment campaign last year, and later for lobbyists charging between \$250 and \$400 per hour on a separate government relations contract.

Regardless of what you think about whether cash-strapped public school boards should be spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on strategists, it strikes me as offensive that a board

contractor would leap to threatening to sue one of its employers -- especially trustees earning \$5,000 a year.

Neither Navigator's lawyer, Brian Shiller, nor its lead partner on the most recent contracts, well-known Liberal strategist Warren Kinsella, would speak to me about the issue.

Sheila Ward, chair of the TDSB, did not return numerous phone calls.

Oliver Carroll, chair of the Catholic board, told me he believes the board must use professional strategists to even the playing field with the well-resourced education ministry. He says discussions around strategy have been done privately, so the board doesn't reveal its hand to the government and that the board's lawyers have given their okay (perhaps they read the Education Act differently than I do).

"I hate this conflict," Carroll told me, adding that if Rizzo was so concerned about misusing public money, she shouldn't have tried to get pay increases for trustee assistants or looked into big rebates for trustee campaign donors out of board coffers.

Said Rizzo: "I retracted my statements because I didn't want to get into a legal battle with a big public affairs company with millions of dollars behind them versus me and my \$5,000 a year."

Kinsella recently announced on his blog he was leaving Navigator. It appears both boards plan to continue working with him, but they may now have to get trustees to approve new contracts, under a new name. Wonder how much of that discussion they'll do behind closed doors?