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Issaquah bus driver appeals firing for "flipping off" President Bush

By Manuel Valdes

Seattle Times Eastside bureau

An Issaquah school bus driver fired for allegedly "flipping off" President Bush during a visit to Seattle in June is appealing her termination.

According to Issaquah School District officials, the incident happened when a district school bus stopped for the president's motorcade while returning from a field trip in Seattle.

As the president waved to the school children from his limousine, the bus driver made an obscene gesture, said Sara Niegowski, a spokeswoman for the district.

Bush was in Seattle attending a fundraiser for Congressman Dave Reichert, who was riding in the same limousine.

Reichert campaign officials confirm that Bush told Reichert about the gesture and that the congressman later called Issaquah's superintendent to let her know about the incident.

But the district had been informed by other staff the same day it happened, Niegowski said. It investigated and found evidence pointing to "unprofessional conduct" from the driver, she said.

The 43-year-old driver, with the district since 1999, was fired in September. "This incident has to do with the responsibility of an employee who is supervising students to act professionally and serve as a role model for appropriate behavior," said Issaquah Superintendent Janet Barry. "This was part of a pattern of behavior with this particular bus driver, not an isolated incident."

The fired bus driver filed a union grievance last month for wrongful termination. She has declined to be identified or interviewed.

Chris Dugovich, a spokesman for the Washington State Council of County and City Employees, said it wants the district to re-evaluate its decision.

"There's only one individual who saw this and it happens to be the president of the United States," Dugovich said. "We're interested in saving her employment."

Barry said she personally knows Reichert from his days serving as King County Sheriff when they discussed school resource officers. Reichert called as a courtesy, Barry said.

"He never discussed his view or suggested what action he thought would be appropriate to take," Barry said. "He reported the incident believing — rightly — that I would want to know this occurred, that as a steward of children and public resources, one of my employees had acted inappropriately in her job capacity."

Barry reiterated that the decision to terminate the employee was not motivated by any political reason.

"If the bus driver had made the gesture to a driver who cut her off on a local road, we would have taken the same action," Barry said.

Times reporter Jonathan Martin contributed to this report.

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