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## Ex-cons could be hired under new Duval school district policy

The changes would place those with felony charges older than a decade in the running for jobs

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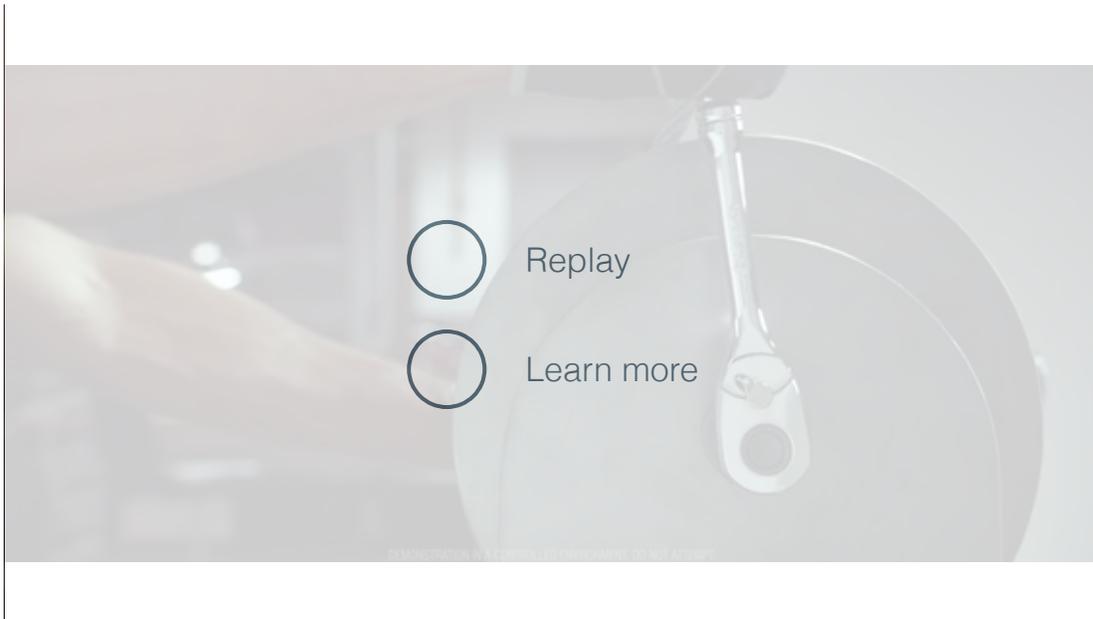
Kevin Hubbard had the experience needed to be a locksmith for Duval County Public Schools.

However, he was arrested for two misdemeanors one night 22 years ago. The incidents now prevent him from working for the district.

Hubbard represents an unknown number of people who want to work for the district but have been barred because of a criminal past.

And because of people like Hubbard, Superintendent Nikolai Vitti is planning to change the district's guidelines for hiring new employees. The change would allow applicants with a felony that happened more than 10 years ago to be in the running for a job. Applicants like Hubbard with two misdemeanors older than five years could still be considered as well.

It's a change that people outside of the district, including Edward Waters College President Nat Glover, strongly support. However, some parents aren't pleased.



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“What the superintendent is proposing makes sense and it’s actually good business and it’s humane,” Glover said. “We’re not talking about putting violent criminals and sexual offenders and sexual predators into schools. All I’m saying is, for these minor offenses, let’s put an expiration date on some of that stuff.”

Fletcher Middle School parent Lee Watters said he could be more comfortable with the misdemeanor change, but “I can’t possibly wrap my head around allowing someone convicted of a felony to teach children.”

“I know that people shouldn’t have to live forever with their mistakes, but not with my children,” parent Meagan Elsner said. “There are other jobs they can do, but don’t put them around children.”

Three phone calls to Duval County Parent-Teacher Association Gretchen Lynch were not returned. Duval Teachers United President Terrie Brady could not be reached Monday.

Under the district’s current hiring guidelines, no one with a felony charge or two misdemeanors can be hired. The hiring change would apply to anyone applying for any district positions — from chief-level jobs at the district office to teacher, secretary or custodian.

When compared to other districts’ guidelines, Duval’s is strict. Miami-Dade County, which won the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education, considers applicants with felony incidents that happened more than 10 years ago. St. Johns County, a district where student achievement regularly ranks near the top on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, also will consider some applicants if the felony offense is older than a decade.

There are certain felonies that, under state law, disqualify an applicant no matter how long ago the incident happened. Those felonies include murder, manslaughter, sexual misconduct, sexual battery, aggravated assault and battery, kidnapping, arson and more. Under Vitti's guideline change, the state law's list of disqualifying offenses still will be enforced.

Vitti does not need School Board approval to change the guidelines, but he alerted board members about the move last week.

Vitti said he has been nudged to make the change by people in private conversations after town-hall meetings. He told board members that he wants the guidelines changed because he believes the district has been forced to reject several qualified candidates because the person has a felony or misdemeanor.

Vitti said the current guidelines disproportionately block applicants who live in or grew up in the city's urban core.

"I'm not afraid to say this, what we're losing is African-American males," he told the board.

Separately, Vitti said Duval County has too few African-American male teachers.

Hubbard comes from a family of locksmiths and has been learning the trade since age 15. He said he was driving his new car home one night and a police officer pulled him over because his paper license plate was expired. When the officer ran Hubbard's name, the officer found that he wrote a bad check for \$30 at Walmart.

Hubbard was arrested for the expired plate and bad check. Two misdemeanors. One night.

Hubbard said the school district intended to hire him, but had to rescind the offer.

"And I was pretty upset about that because those were minor offenses," he said. "I understand, working for the School Board, that you have to be around children and you don't want criminals around them, I get that, but I think [the district] should look at what the incidents were."

School Board Chairman Fel Lee said he is open to the change. Fellow board member Jason Fischer said he opposed the change.

"I don't think it's in the best interest of children to willfully increase their exposure to adults with criminal backgrounds," Fischer said.

Other board members like Paula Wright and Connie Hall said they would feel more comfortable if Vitti provided data to support the change.

Vitti said the district's HR staff will gather three years of data showing the number of people who were offered a job and then had the offer rescinded because the background check came back unfavorable. Sonita Young, the district's chief human resource officer, said she hopes to have that information by week's end.

Young said Hubbard is one of many stories. She told the School Board that Duval is losing good applicants to nearby school districts like Clay and St. Johns, where the hiring policy allows applicants with felonies and multiple misdemeanors to remain in the running for a job.

"It's crippling the district from being able to recruit and retain good employees," Young said.

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