

Emily Richmond: Welcome back to EWA Radio, everyone. I'm Emily Richmond, EWA Public Editor. Joined today, as always, by my colleague, Mikhail Zinshteyn.

Mikhail Zinshteyn: Hi, everybody.

Richmond: Today, we are talking to Diane Rado, education reporter for the Chicago Tribune, about her coverage of how Illinois lawmakers are intervening, and in some cases, potentially circumventing safeguards in the teacher licensing process. Diane Rado, welcome to EWA Radio.

Diane Rado: Hi. I'm glad to be on. I appreciate it.

Richmond: Before we jump to the questions, could you give us just a brief overview of your story on lawmakers intervening in the teacher licensing process for the listeners who might not yet have had a chance to read it?

Rado: This is a story that ran last month related to state lawmaker intervention. In a process that I think most people would consider sacrosanct. This is the process where teachers have to be qualified based on coursework and a variety of other requirements. Who would have known that lawmakers would have been making phone calls and essentially intervening in whether or not certain lawmakers will get fully credentialed? That's the basis of the story and we looked at many lawmakers who did get involved in the situation and many teachers. That's the gist of the story.

Zinshteyn: Personnel files can be notoriously difficult to access. How complicated was it to get your open records request fulfilled?

Rado: It wasn't that complicated. I started out originally with a Freedom of Information request to the state, and the Illinois State Board of Education is sometimes slow -- slower than I'd like to have them be -- but they are usually very responsive. When I FOIA'd them, and the FOIA actually came out of another FOIA. It's an interesting story; I'd been earlier working on a story about a very messed-up new teacher licensing system. So messed up that the state finally fired the contractor.

I was talking to a lot of regional folks who handle licensing matters in the trenches and they were all complaining, but the

state was telling me everything was kind of fine. At that point, I said, "I'm not getting that from the regional folks so can you give me all emails related to this system and how it's working?"

In that bunch of emails, which was in the first FOIA, there were hundreds of emails and within those emails was a tiny little reference made to one of the cases where somebody was having problems with the new licensing system. One of the people in that email said something along the lines of, "Well, this is a very high-priority licensing case because our 'legislative folks' got involved."

I just stopped because I thought, just by way of background, I did cover the Florida Legislature for 10 years so I'm very, very familiar with lawmaker intervention and how lawmakers act, and so the moment I saw that line, I made a note that I had to do another FOIA when I got done with this first story. Then, within literally two days after I published the first story, I did a Freedom of Information request to the state to ask for, "In 5 years, I want every lawmaker who ever intervened in a licensing case." I did make very specific that I wanted the lawmaker's name and I wanted the teacher's name because, in the past, there had been some FOIAs where they blacked out teacher's names.

Richmond: Yeah. A good reminder: you can't be too specific in a FOIA. It's just not possible.

Rado: Right. I just said, "Let's go back 5 years," and sometimes agencies will say, "Well, we want the names of lawmakers." It took them a while -- they did a couple of extensions -- but they did ultimately provide a list of emails related to involvement.

Then I had to setup a spreadsheet on my own. Sometimes, it was a just a quick name of a lawmaker and then a last name of an educator, and we had to really figure out who these people were, how did they know these lawmakers.

We did have to then FOIA individual districts. The districts in Illinois, particularly suburban districts are also pretty responsive. They did respond and provide further information if we needed it, so the FOIA process on this one was not that difficult; it was piecing together who these folks were and how were they related in some way to this lawmaker. Did they work on that campaign? Were they a relative?

The hard part wasn't, in this case, really, the FOIAs; it was creating the relationship. Why would this person call their lawmaker? We had to use a lot of LexisNexis records, campaign contribution records, to just link up, "Who was this?" In some cases, we'd be going through all of these LexisNexis records and we'd find that the maiden name of this lawmaker was the name of this educator. We finally figured out -- they're related. It's either a niece, a sister. When we looked at addresses, we would look at, "Where did the lawmaker live?" We sometimes found neighbors; that these people were neighbors.

Richmond: That's incredible.

Rado: Yeah, it was difficult. We really had worked very, very hard on figuring out those relationships. I don't know a lot of people who actually call lawmakers. This is an unusual thing, that teachers were needing intervention from lawmakers.

We had to try to figure out what the relationships were. Sometimes, there wasn't a relationship. Someone was just a constituent -- they really did just call their lawmaker -- but we did look closely at those ones that made campaign contributions to the lawmaker or had a relationship, a friendship, campaign-type relationship. Those are the ones that I thought were more interesting.

Richmond: You mentioned a moment ago that you're certainly familiar with lawmakers interventions, and you mentioned the story that cronyism is a way of life in Illinois politics.

Rado: Yes.

Richmond: I'm wondering; did any aspect of what you found actually make you just sit up and be surprised?

Rado: Again, because I have covered this in the past, I remember when I was in Florida covering the legislature, a state senator got up and decided he wanted to change the basic skills test requirements because, basically, he admitted, his wife was a teacher and she couldn't pass the basic skills test, so he was trying to change the law to allow his wife to pass it.

Florida's really an open state -- it's the sunshine state -- and so this lawmaker was pretty open. In Illinois, I don't think it's as

open, and I think the most surprising thing was that it just happens. You think of Illinois as a state of nepotism, cronyism, political favors; I just don't think most people would think, "You're actually intervening to help out a teacher get a license?" That was a surprise to me. A big surprise, even after having covered state government for a long time.

A lot of times [the lawmakers'] aides would make a phone call or someone would have a conversation in the halls of the capital. It was the tip iceberg type of thing. I think there's a lot more than we were able to uncover at the beginning because we don't know about all those hallway conversations and how things get done and how many people made phone calls. We had asked for emails but we didn't ask for all the phone calls, every single phone call made.

One of the lawmakers, actually, when he didn't get any results from the state agency, he ended up filing legislation to literally change the law to help about two people get licensed. Literally, about two. Maybe six and on the other, there were two pieces of legislation. That was very difficult because, in one case, his name wasn't on the bill. It was always easy to find a bill sponsor but his name wasn't on the bill; he had gotten someone else to file it for him. Then another case, I couldn't find the bill number; it was in a prior legislative session. I finally got that from another source who had emailed me and had the bill number.

It was overall a pretty difficult process to nail down, but it was, I think, worthwhile. We got lots of emails and phone calls, and I do think Illinois is immune in some ways; I'm not sure everybody was as outraged probably as I was but, because it's Illinois and I think there's a high level of acceptance in Illinois of what I would call cronyism, nepotism, whatever. People are used to it here, but I think it was a story that needed to be told, that this happens.

Zinshteyn: You've had several other stories looking at deficiencies in Illinois teacher licensing processes. Have you had to counter criticism that these are hit pieces?

Rado: One of the teachers who wrote, who emailed her lawmaker, wasn't emailing to get help with her license. She was also already fully credentialed. She's emailing because she said, "Can you all figure out why some of these people I know are not properly

credentialed but they're still working in schools? I mean, who's supposed to be looking at that?"

That's what she emailed her lawmaker about, so bingo, right again, I thought, "Really? She's asking why nobody is looking at this," and so I put that on my note at my desk and said, "You know, when I get done with this other story, let's look at what's going on with teachers who are not credentialed."

Christy and I proceeded to do that story and that was a very, very difficult story as well, trying to pin down who these teachers were, did they have the proper credentials for the classes they were being assigned. We did write the story and as a result of that, one of the major teacher unions in Illinois, which is, recently, the IFT, put out a petition, saying that they want teachers to not subscribe to the Tribune.

Part of this is also just the Tribune's editorial board has been, is in favor of things that teachers don't like, so there's a long history of concerns by the teachers' unions with the editorial board of the Tribune. They kind of roll everything together and they claim that when we write a story, that story helps the editorial board privatize education. They're very down on the Tribune editorial board.

This was a surprise to us. All of the emails that we received and phone the calls were saying, "Oh, my gosh. This happened to me as well. I was a social science teacher and I was made to teach math, and I didn't know what I was doing." Lot of emails from teachers very supportive of our stories, saying, "This happened to me too. That's just the tip of the iceberg," but the IFT, even right now, has a petition up, getting people to sign it, to not subscribe to the Tribune, so that's just the reality. They don't like us sometimes.

Richmond: You mentioned reaction from the union's reporting. I'm wondering, what about at the school district level and then also maybe from parents? What are you hearing?

Rado: I would have to say 100% of my emails were supportive of the story and concerned about why their child is not getting a fully-credentialed teacher. I don't have any of them that were negative about it. They think this is a matter of concern; they did think that

they should have a properly credentialed teacher in the classroom.

School districts themselves facilitate this; school districts themselves are doing the hiring and they are making the assignments. The state and the districts are using loopholes to hire teachers who are not properly credentialed in a particular area.

We did make the point very strongly in the story that these teachers were licensed -- they did have a basic teaching license -- but the issue was they were then assigned and hired to do something different than what they had trained for and met all requirements for. We talked to some of the experts, there was some discussion about, "Well, sometimes there's just a fabulous teacher out there and maybe here she is not credentialed in X but really can still teach it," and I believe that probably just happened in some cases but we have standards on what you need to do to be a qualified teacher in a particular field.

It was very interesting. We talked to teachers who said, "Yeah, you know, I wasn't credentialed at the time." I think it's so tough to get in the door now as a teacher. At least in Illinois, there really is a surplus of teachers in most fields now. I would say all fields, some of them more so than others, but it's very hard to get a job and so I think these teachers who come in, they really need a job and they agreed to accept a role for which they're not completely qualified.

What we've noticed in the records is that a teacher may come in, being told, "We know that you're a math teacher but you have to teach science." Within about a year, they put them back in math, so I think sometimes it's an entry point. It's an entry point, even though the state uses words like "illegal"; it's not lawful for someone to teach without the proper credentials, but it happens.

Richmond: Diane, usually we hear that the least effective or poorest credentialed teachers are at high-poverty schools. What can you tell us about the patterns you were seeing in the schools you were looking at?

Rado: We were surprised because some of them, the studies all talk about disadvantaged districts that has problems recruiting, etc., and that's where the problem lies, but we were really finding

some of this in some of the most affluent districts on the north shore, like in the Chicago suburbs, where people were coming in without the proper credentials.

We found there were lots of loopholes on how to do this, and one of them was that a district has to say, "Well, we can't possibly find anybody else to do this. We just can't find ... We tried, we interviewed, but we just couldn't find another teacher." We found that that was the case in something like language arts. There are thousands and thousands of language arts teachers out there. It's hard, I think, for most people to believe that you could not have found an English language arts teacher.

In some ways, it's, "We really just want to hire this person. We're just going to use the loophole and do it." It wasn't just in hard stuff like physics; it was really in other subjects as well, like English language arts where there's plenty of people out there. Plenty.

Zinshteyn: Right. Diane, your investigation of cronyism is striking, and I'm wondering whether this and other stories on licensure -- you wrote one on a software system that lost and mislabeled legions of teachers' records.

Rado: Yeah. That was where it started. That was when we started really looking at all this stuff. That was the beginning of our look at some of these things.

Zinshteyn: Right. There's that story, then there's your series of stories on teachers not being credentialed for the right classes. Has that made parents doubt that the teachers were educating their kids or fit for the job, unfairly or not? Are you hearing anything like that?

Rado: Most of the feedback we've gotten has been from teachers. I've gotten these emails from teachers in their 80s who just remember the horrible day when they were told they had to teach math even though they were a social studies teacher.

I have to say, I'm not sure, and I wish there was some easy way to allow parents to know upfront if their teacher is qualified. Now, Florida has a requirement, where they send out letters to parents that say, "Your kid is in a class with a teacher that's not completely credentialed, or appropriately credentialed." They send those letters out; we don't do that in Illinois, and I do wish

that there were something that would happen where Illinois would do the same thing.

For a while, under NCLB, we had the highly qualified stuff and schools had to send out notices that someone was "highly qualified" but this is a little bit different. I wish there was some avenue. You can go on the system for licensing and do a public search and see where, if your teacher is credentialed but I'm not sure people even know how to start looking in that way. I wish there was a way districts just, for every child's parent, got some sort of letter that said, "Mrs. Rado is this, and she has a journalism degree and a master's degree."

Richmond: Rado is an education watchdog reporter for the Chicago Tribune, doing K12 investigative and policy stories. She's worked for the Tribune for about 10 years and prior to that, she covered the governor and legislature of Florida for the St. Petersburg Times, which is now the Tampa Bay Times.

Diane, thanks for making the time for EWA Radio.

Rado: Okay. Thank you.

Richmond: You know, Mikhail, I think Diane's reporting is a good starting place for regional and local reporters of other publications. Even if it turns out there hasn't been undue influence exerted by policy makers over teacher licensing and hiring, I think these are the kinds of questions reporters should be regularly asking about that process.

Zinshteyn: I agree, and as newsrooms move toward integrating more digital tools out there, I see a future in which these newsrooms are creating the databases that Diane wished that the state provided parents. I foresee, in a few years, a paper like the Tribune or any other local outlet, providing parents with information on whether teachers are appropriately licensed or not.

Richmond: Why do you think we're entering a change in time? I mean, it makes me feel old but I can remember having to call a public library to try to get a phone number for somebody from the white pages, and now you can go on Google Earth and get a picture of his house. I think some of these stories may get a little bit easier, in terms of getting the documentation in your records, but you're still going to need smart people to step through them and catch

those little moments like Diane talked about. I thought it was really telling that two other stories came out of the one story she thought she was working on.

Zinshteyn: True, but maybe legislators start responding to all this transparency by having more and more of their conversations on private lines or in hallways.

Richmond: I think that's a good point, and you know what? That wraps it up for this edition of EWA Radio. Just a reminder to check out ewa.org for the latest news, our handy topics pages on everything from teachers to books to federal education reform. Have a great week, everyone.

Zinshteyn: See you soon.