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Janitors clean up

Eleven custodians have been charged with rigging contracts for window washing at several city schools in exchange for 10% cash kickbacks. According to a joint probe by state Attorney General Eliot Spitzer and special schools investigator Ed Stancik, the jobs awarded to favored contractors were worth $3,000 to $20,000. The janitors collected bucketsful of cash. In one case, $62,000. And windows never even got washed.

This is not the first time that Stancik has caught school custodians with their hands dirty. A 1996 investigation turned up massive abuse of overtime filings among thousands of custodial employees. And just this April, a janitor at the School of the Future in Manhattan was accused of using his budget as a personal credit line to cover things like outings to Atlantic City. Trying to improve his own future?

Past custodial scandals produced some reforms, but those who want to reap fat profits from the system still have the means to do so. With little oversight, the Board of Education's 838 custodians control a budget of $351 million, with $40 million alone earmarked for outside goods and services. And they don't even have to skirt the law to skim money. They can pad their salaries by as much as $40,000 by agreeing to cover other schools — without having to physically be there. Busted pipe? A virtual janitor will get on it right away, or whenever.

Stancik, who vows to keep investigating the custodial mess, has recommended centralized recordkeeping for purchases and outside contractors. An obvious, workable fix. Anywhere, alas, but at the stultified Board of Ed.

Schools Chancellor Harold Levy wants to be able to audit custodial spending — a power denied him by the current contract. The boss is not allowed to control the employees. Only in New York.

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