Remote work a red herring in K-M response

You know you've hit a nerve when the attacks get personal.

Over the past year or so, this newspaper has provided in-depth coverage of the chaotic changes and challenges going on in Kasson-Mantorville Schools. For those who think we're being overly dramatic, consider this: The district has had two superintendents resign over the past four years, two before their contracts were up. The third one was an interim. A school board member's husband, a K-M middle school teacher, was suspended and eventually resigned– information uncovered from a standard public data request.

That school board member resigned last October, after an alleged confrontation with then-Superintendent Ted Ihns, according to information obtained via a standard public data request. Re-elected in November, she took office in January, then resigned again in February. It should also be noted that this came following an investigation conducted by a third-party investigator, which cost taxpayers $7,251.65, according to Ihns. An additional $3,276 was spent on attorney fees from Sept. 23 through Nov. 26, according to information provided by Ihns.

We were very hopeful when new superintendent Beth Giese made clear from the start that she was interested in being open and transparent with the media. We even praised this approach with an editorial. She responded to multiple emails and text messages, even while on vacation, to answer questions about a troubling issue that arose after a recording of a K-M school board meeting abruptly ended.

Now, the DCI reporter who has been digging deep into the district's business is being told to limit his emails and text messages. Last week, we published an op-ed from Giese that demands a response–especially as it included a personal attack on that pesky reporter who keeps asking all the questions.

Giese described DCI data requests as "excessive." That's a subjective term designed to convince district residents that the newspaper is running up its costs for no good reason. What Giese doesn't mention is that a data request represents the reporter's last-ditch effort to get information for our on-going reporting. It's not our first choice; it's our last.

Giese claims the district has spent $9,946 plus $1,877 in staff time on data requests. As yet, we've seen no documentation of those amounts. Last January, we were told the number was over $4,200 in legal fees through the end of November, and that was before our investigative reporting on the aforementioned school board member and her husband was complete.

Giese painted a current data request for her emails and those of school board members, related to the appointment of an acting board chair, as nothing more than a frivolous waste of time. When elected officials aren't forthcoming about their actions, even one this simple, we're left with no choice but to dig our own answers from the pile of information that is, by law, available to the public.

Are data requests expensive? Of course, they are. That's why we only use them when we have no other choice. We cannot stress this enough: Our data requests are submitted when officials choose not to answer our questions or provide answers that are vague, troubling, and/or not in sync with the information we already know.

Officials who think we'll just drop a story because they stop answering questions should know better by now. We find Giese's decision to personally attack reporter Alex Malm deeply troubling. She said that perhaps the data requests reflect "the fact that th requesting reporter does not live in or have a connection to our amazing communities." Malm confronts that misinformation in this week's "Outside Perspectives" column. But there's an even larger concern raised in Giese's statement, which sows doubt in the value and accuracy of a reporter's work based on where they live.

In our post-pandemic world, more than 35 million Americans work at least some of the time from their homes or other remote locations. Are all those folks less committed to their jobs as well? Or is that criticism reserved for news reporters who ask too many questions?

If Giese thinks school districts have it tough these days, she should sit down and talk with our publisher. Every single one of our reporters lives outside all or most of the cities on their beats.

Does Giese really believe that Dodge Media Inc. or Bussler Publishing (the DCI's sister paper) which earlier this year won the coveted Mills Trophy as the best weekly newspaper in the state, should just shut down its operations, creating yet another news desert? Or was this an attempt to undermine the community's trust in our reporting?

Even more deeply disturbing, however, was her attempt to scare residents by suggesting that "their private questions, concerns, or complaints sent to the superintendent or board might be swept into data requests." Since, as she admits, the district itself is responsible for redacting all personal details, we're left to wonder about the real purpose behind her fear-mongering.

The last thing we want is to be in this position. We'd prefer a professional, cooperative relationship with all elected officials and public employees.

But we're not doing this work for them. We're doing this work for the people who elect them and pay their salaries. You deserve to know what political machines are operating behind all those seemingly innocuous decisions. You deserve to know where your tax dollars are going and why.

We believe the critical question here is not why we're making data requests. It's why they’ve all been necessary.