



## Sarasota School Board member broke election law during campaign

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**Shirley Brown paid a \$200 fine.**

Sarasota County School Board member Shirley Brown was fined \$200 by the Florida Elections Commission last week for violating state election laws against using partisan appeals when running for a nonpartisan office.

Brown defeated Karen Rose in a narrowly decided race last August. Weeks before the election she sent a batch of mailers to registered Republicans in the county with the words "Republican Primary voter alert" at the top. The ad accused "labor unions" of illegally spending \$71,449 to get Rose elected. School board races are nonpartisan, and candidates are not allowed to campaign using partisan labels.

Brown, a registered Democrat, said she doesn't believe the mailer violated law since she never mentioned her own party affiliation in the flier. She said the union was upset that its candidate, a registered Republican, didn't win.

"They didn't like that I let people know how much money they were spending," she said. "And they still didn't take me out, and they were really upset about that."

Brown pointed out that the ethics commission considers the offense a "minor violation" and noted that she had neither admitted nor denied any wrongdoing.

Rose, a former school administrator who won the endorsement of the Sarasota Classified/Teachers Association, lost the race by roughly 800 votes, and she said the mailer may have made the difference.

"Not only did she put that out, she also did a robocall with the whole world which was just as bad as that flier and was just as much as a lie," Rose said.

Rose said if she had been elected to the board, Superintendent Todd Bowden would not have the “ironclad” contract that was approved after the election. The board voted 3-2 to give Bowden a four-year deal with guaranteed raises and a super-majority vote required to fire him.

Rose is running for the School Board again, this time for board vice chairwoman Caroline Zucker’s seat, which will be up for election in 2020.

Rose had an elections complaint filed against her in the race as well over campaign contributions, but the commission found it legally insufficient.

The union has asked Brown to distribute a mailer to the same addresses making it clear that the union did not break the law.

“We are suing her for defamation unless she sends a mailer retracting it,” union executive director Barry Dubin said. “I want her to send out to the Republicans that she first sent it to.”

Brown said she had no plans to send a mailer retracting her original mailer.