

# Local & State

CORRUPTION CASE | NORTH MIAMI

## Ex-principal of adult-ed center gets 6-year sentence

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When he arrived from Haiti in the late 1980s, Jean Ridore was too old to enroll in high school. The jovial Ridore nevertheless earned his degree from North Miami's Adult Education Center, the first stop in a meteoric rise through the education system that culminated with him serving as principal of the very same campus.

But on Tuesday, Ridore's journey ended ingloriously. Shackled in a jail jumpsuit, Ridore chose not to speak and hung his head as a Miami-Dade judge sentenced him to 6 years in prison for hiring no-show employees while demanding kickbacks.

"You were making very good money. I believe six figures," Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Mark Blumstein said. "For one reason or

another, you started selling those jobs ... you breached that trust. You abused that trust."

The sentence was stiffer than expected. Prosecutors had asked for five years in prison, while his defense attorney wanted probation, or at least one year in jail.

"He used his position to line his pockets," Miami-Dade public corruption prosecutor Sandra Miller-Batiste told the judge.

Ridore, 44, was sentenced three years after corruption investigators arrested him in an undercover sting. In September, a jury deliberated only about an hour before convicting him of illegal compensation, official misconduct and grand theft.

The Miami-Dade school district runs the school based at North Miami High for more than 4,500 students at multiple campuses in the northeast region of the county. The school is

billed as the largest and most successful adult-education program in Miami-Dade.

Ridore was a well-known mover and shaker in North Miami's Haitian-American community, and his role overseeing the city's night school was an important one for immigrants needing to perfect their English, earn their GED or learn vocational skills. He even had hopes of running for elected office one day in his native country.

Ridore's story was local education lore. After graduating from the adult-education center, he went on to earn degrees from Miami Dade College, Florida International University and Barry University.

At the North Miami Adult Education Center, he oversaw more than 400 staffers and pulled in a salary of more than \$110,000. As principal, he also had wide authority

over personnel.

With that power, investigators learned, Ridore began hiring "ghost employees" — who were paid, never showed up for work and were suspected of giving part of their salary to the principal. Prosecutors estimate he stole over \$200,000 from school district coffers.

Investigators with the State Attorney's Office Public Corruption Task Force and the Miami-Dade County Inspector General's Office discovered that two ex-employees got paid more than \$14,000 in total, despite them being out of the country during their supposed work periods.

A Miami detective working with the corruption squad went undercover, posing as a handyman named "Ali Cabral." Ridore hired the undercover detective, who paid him a

\$1,000 "deposit."

"It's your job ... you don't have to do nothing, man,"

Ridore told him in an exchange captured on an undercover recording of the encounter. He also instructed the undercover officer not tell anyone about giving Ridore money.

The supposed handyman never showed up for work, then met up with Ridore to give him more cash. Once Ridore took the money, agents arrested him.

Ridore could have gotten a lot less time behind bars.

He cooperated with prosecutors, twice giving statements to investigators about purported corruption in the school system. But so far, most of what he said was already known by detectives, although he did help initiate one criminal probe that remains ongoing, prosecutor Marie Pe-



Ridore

rikes told the judge at Tuesday's sentencing hearing.

Ridore initially accepted a plea deal for one year in prison — but Judge Blumstein rejected the deal. Months later, prosecutors offered him 9 months in jail, which Ridore rejected.

Defense lawyer Manuel Casabielle asked for leniency, hoping his clients post-arrest career helping at-risk young men get jobs as part of a non-profit program would sway the judge. "You cannot punish a defendant for going to trial," Casabielle said.

But Blumstein — noting that he and his family are products of public education — was not swayed.

"These actions have consequences," the judge said.

After he gets out of prison, Ridore will also have to serve an additional two years of house arrest, plus 7 years of probation.