

Ex-principal admits to giving false info to MOE

Former River Valley High head lied when quizzed about affair with education vendor

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Former River Valley High principal Koh Yong Chiah, who lied about an extramarital affair with a vendor to whom he awarded millions of dollars in school contracts, pleaded guilty yesterday to giving false information to a Ministry of Education (MOE) senior officer.

The 61-year-old educator of 35 years' service, who had been principal of four schools since 1995, lied to cluster superintendent Chia Ban Tin on Nov 24, 2005, that he was not having an affair with school service provider Ivy Loke Wai Lin, 55.

Ms Chia, who had been tasked to inquire into an anonymous complaint against Koh for alleged misconduct, then reported to the Director General of Education that there had been no such misconduct. Koh was then principal of Jurong Junior College (JJC). He later became head of River Valley High in 2009.

The two met in 2000 while Koh was principal of The Chinese High School and Ms Loke was working for the then Television Corporation of Singapore. She had approached the school to take part in an overseas community service project.

Though both were married, they became attracted to each other, and had sex during a service project to Lijiang, China, in March 2001.

Between May and November 2005, in his capacity as the final approving authority for contracts at JJC, Koh awarded six contracts worth \$162,491 to Ms Loke's firm, Education Architects 21 (EA 21). He did not disclose the nature of his relationship with Ms Loke to the quotation approval panel.

Deputy Public Prosecutor Navin Naidu said their intimate relationship lasted till and including the period that Koh was principal of JJC and River Valley High. In 2004, she separated from her husband and they divorced a year later.

Between March 2010 and July 2012 – while at River Valley High – Koh approved the awarding of 39 contracts to Education Incorporation (EI), another of Ms Loke's firms. In all, between 2005 and 2012, he approved \$3.4 million worth of contracts to EA 21 and EI.

The ministry looked into the relationship when it received the complaint in November 2005. Koh, however, denied it when interviewed by Ms Chia, who advised him not to get involved personally with Ms Loke.

But it did not end there. Seven years later, the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) received a tip about Koh's involvement in corrupt dealings with Ms Loke.

Seeking a sentence of four to six weeks' jail, Deputy Public Prosecutor G. Kannan said this was a serious case of a senior public officer



who was dishonest about the conduct of his official duties. "Public servants must be deterred from making false statements to cover up their misdeeds," he said.

The DPP said the integrity and transparency of the procurement process must be protected. By deceiving his superiors, Koh could continue approving the use of public funds with "flagrant disregard to the subsisting conflict of interest".

He said the public disquiet in this case was evident, with a school principal lying to cover up a tawdry affair, and worse, awarding government contracts worth millions of dollars to his lover.

Koh's lawyer Lawrence Ang said in mitigation that the father of two's instinctive reaction when asked by Ms Chia was to deny the affair out of embarrassment.

He said Koh did not derive any benefit from the false statement. There was neither suggestion that the ministry had suffered losses nor competitors squeezed out, he said.

Pleading for a fine, the counsel said that his client faced the prospect of dismissal from the Education Service.

Koh is currently suspended from duties, said the ministry yesterday. "Educators who fail to comply with our standards of conduct and discipline will be subjected to disciplinary action. For serious cases, they may be dismissed from the service," said a ministry spokesman.

Koh told the court he was ashamed, and sorry for his family and colleagues. "Whatever that has been established over 35 years in terms of my career, my contribution towards education, I wish to use that to compensate for the mistake that I made in 2005," he said in Mandarin.

District Judge Hamidah Ibrahim will pass sentence on Jan 7. The maximum penalty is six months' jail and a \$1,000 fine.

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Koh Yong Chiah (left) lied to cluster superintendent Chia Ban Tin on Nov 24, 2005, that he was not having an affair with school service provider Ivy Loke Wai Lin. As the final approving authority at Jurong Junior College and River Valley High, he had awarded millions of dollars in school contracts to Ms Loke's firms.

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LAU FOOK KONG