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BODY:

Students at Miramar's Glades Middle will be in portables for weeks - and possibly months - longer than promised because the School Board botched the job of picking a firm to build a permanent school.

An administrative judge ruled this week that board members must start their selection process over, delaying Glades again. A losing firm, Magnum Construction Management, filed a bid protest last fall after the School Board chose a politically connected firm to build the \$30 million, 2,000-student school.

MCM's price was \$4 million less than the winning builder, James Pirtle Construction.

The finger-pointing over the Glades Middle job raised questions about how the School Board awards construction contracts, because nearly all of the major projects in recent years have gone to two firms - Pirtle and James Cummings Construction. The flap prompted the school district construction department to change the way it selects builders.

For parents, the ruling means a delay in

building the much-needed school. Glades Middle opened for the 2004-05 school year in portable classrooms at Pines Boulevard and Southwest 172nd Street, the site of the old Flanagan High ninth-grade annex.

The goal was to have the permanent building adjacent to Everglades High ready sometime during the coming school year, but now it's doubtful that it could open even by the start of the 2006-07 year.

If there are additional delays, Glades sixth-graders could spend their entire middle school career in portables.

"Our problem is, we have kids at a portable site," said Deputy Superintendent Mike Garretson, who oversees construction. "We told them they would be [in portables] for 14 months. That's what I feel bad about."

After two elementary schools - Silver Shores and Sunset Lakes - were successfully fast-tracked to open in 2002, construction performance in Miramar has been spotty.

The biggest problem was Everglades High, which missed several scheduled opening dates before the fall of 2003, when teachers and students finally moved in. The \$45 million school was built by low bidder SBR Joint Venture, which failed to deliver on time.

The sour experience with SBR in part led the board to favor builders it knew for future jobs, including Glades Middle.

There have been other problems, most notably a delayed 24-classroom addition at Miramar High. The project is two years behind schedule and \$3 million over budget, because the architect and the school district failed to realize a four-hour fire wall was needed to attach the addition to the old building, an

internal audit concluded.

The classroom addition is being moved to a different site on campus.

"It's inexcusable that they can't get their act together," said Miramar Mayor Lori Moseley. "There seems to be a pattern here."

In the Glades Middle case, Miami-based MCM had wanted administrative judge John Van Laningham to award it the job.

But the judge ruled it was too difficult to determine the School Board's second choice, so the process would have to be repeated.

The School Board can appeal the decision, and board attorney Bob Vignola was reviewing the case.

MCM charged that it was unfairly penalized when board members awarded points for experience. The school district's bid specifications said points would be awarded for successful work in Florida, which MCM said it had done.

But some board members awarded points based on firms having worked successfully in Broward.

In the judge's ruling, special attention was given to the testimony of former board member Judie Budnick, who said she never gives full points on experience unless a builder has given charitable contributions for Broward children.

Charitable work is not required by the district's specifications.

"We were grateful that the board members were so candid," said MCM attorney Alfredo De Armas.

In recent years, Pirtle has received more work than any other firm, and the school district has said the local builder is its most-trusted firm. Pirtle also is a heavy campaign contributor to School Board members.

"I'm shocked," said School Board chairwoman Stephanie Kraft about the ruling. "MCM didn't have the experience here. We can do it over, but I won't do anything different."

Under a new process recently approved by the board, a panel of industry professionals and staff will make a single recommendation to the School Board, which then will vote for or against it.

THE STORY SO FAR

* The School Board opened Glades Middle in the all-portable annex at Pines Boulevard and Southwest 172nd Avenue for the 2004-05 school year to relieve Silver Trail Middle in Pembroke Pines and Falcon Cove Middle in Weston.

* In the fall of 2004, the School Board awarded a design/build contract to James Pirtle Construction for a permanent building adjacent to Everglades High in Miramar.

* One of the losing firms, Miami's MCM, protested the award. An administrative judge ruled this week that the School Board must choose again, because part of its selection process was flawed.

WHAT'S NEXT

The School Board can challenge the judge's decision, or go ahead and re-select a firm, which could still be Pirtle. What's unclear is how long this decision will delay the school's completion.