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ODE Chief Information Officer Resigns After Months On Forced Leave

by **Rob Manning** (https://www.opb.org/contributor/rob-manning/) [Follow \(\)](#) OPB July 9, 2018 10:03 a.m. | Updated: July 11, 2018 11:53 a.m. | Portland, Ore.

The chief information officer at Oregon’s statewide education agency has resigned (http://opb-imgserve-production.s3-website-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/original/susie_strangfield_resignation_

Susie Strangfield alleged “intolerable working conditions” at the Oregon Department of Education after spending five months on leave and under investigation.

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Strangfield was suspended in January but wasn't interviewed by investigators at ODE until the middle of March. Over that time, she said it wasn't clear why ODE was investigating her.

In the meantime, her supervisors canceled her meetings, appointments and speaking appearances, while instructing her not to speak to her colleagues. Strangfield said in her absence, ODE staff received mixed messages as to when, or whether, she would be returning.

"I have dedicated 20 years of my professional life to education," Strangfield said in a statement to OPB. "I have always maintained the highest level of integrity and professionalism in carrying out my duties, including those as ODE's CIO. ODE knows that its accusations against me were frivolous and without substance, as demonstrated in my 37-page response (http://opb-imgservice-production.s3-website-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/original/opb_5.31.2018_strangfield_res) to its accusations."

Investigative records obtained by OPB allege wide-ranging but vague concerns with Strangfield (http://opb-imgservice-production.s3-website-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/original/ode_pre-dismissal_notice-1_redacted_1531335102138.pdf), touching on both her interactions with co-workers and her leadership on specific projects. Strangfield and her attorneys argue the criticisms are misrepresentations and don't rise to the level of policy violations that would justify a suspension, even if they were true.

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“As we have demonstrated in this response, there is nothing in ODE’s Notice that warrants any disciplinary action whatsoever, much less dismissal,” said Strangfield’s attorneys in concluding their lengthy response.

Conduct concerns included allegations that she would raise her voice or use profanity in exchanges with colleagues, particularly managers who reported directly to her. Some involve terse exchanges over the conduct of meetings, which complainants said were inappropriate. Strangfield said those meetings were actually understandable disagreements over how to proceed.

In investigative records, complainants characterize Strangfield as having “anger” at times. But Strangfield said those were miscommunications or examples of “frustration” or distraction on her part, and that she had generally good relationships with co-workers. Strangfield had been assigned to take management training courses, which investigators later pointed out she hadn’t taken right away.

Investigators also alleged problems in her oversight of certain programs, including “E-Rate (https://www.oregon.gov/ode/about-us/Office%20of%20Information%20Technology/obcdlo2.pdf),” a program aimed at extending broadband service to school districts through a complicated partnership involving the Federal Communications Commission,



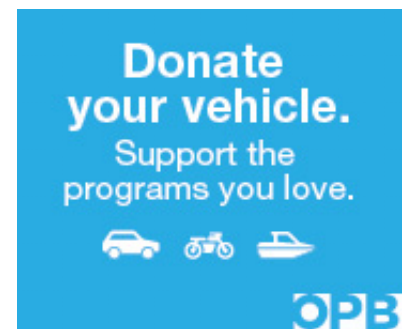
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ODE and Oregon's Chief Education Office. ODE's investigative records blame Strangfield for the program going over budget.

Strangfield said she was one of many people involved in the program and not the person most responsible. At a legislative committee meeting conducted a week after Strangfield was suspended, ODE's assistant superintendent — and Strangfield's supervisor — Rick Crager lauded the E-Rate program.

“We really believe that through some work that we did ... we were able to do a really successful job in piloting this state matching fund program,” Crager told the committee on Jan. 10, 2018

(http://oregon.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?clip_id=c602f0fb-e3e6-49e3-8618-67c396458e98&meta_id=8e1cdf85-9999-4737-b337-78dafe450abf).

Strangfield found apparent inaccuracies and a lack of specific evidence behind investigators' questions and concerns. In that 37-page response to the investigation, Strangfield's attorneys found problems with numerous claims ODE leveled at the department's first-ever female information chief.

“ODE's actions are deeply disappointing to me, especially given that Governor Brown, the Superintendent over ODE, has touted the fact that she champions women in government,” Strangfield said. “ODE began

to marginalize and minimize me, as a woman and in my role as CIO, when I voiced serious concerns about a politically charged project.”

The project Strangfield questioned is the Statewide Longitudinal Data System, or SLDS, a massive database proposed to house information on children who interact with the state’s nearly 200 school districts and multiple state agencies. The project has been a priority of state education leaders going back years, including Brown. The database was promised under the state’s approved plan under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, and has been controversial for years, as OPB reported more than five years ago

(<https://www.opb.org/news/article/planned-oregon-education-database-raises-thorny-questions/>).

Department officials had begun the process to fire Strangfield when she resigned, as indicated by a “pre-dismissal” letter she’d received on May 7.

Strangfield is not the only recent departure at ODE. Her old position remains vacant at the Office of Accountability, Research & Information Services, where four of the top eight positions have turned over recently.

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