

Centinela Valley breaks silence on superintendent's \$663K compensation package

By Rob Kuznia , The Daily Breeze

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The Centinela Valley high school district broke its silence Friday about a Daily Breeze report earlier in the week detailing how Superintendent Jose Fernandez [amassed more than \\$663,000](#) in compensation last year.

The district's official response took the form of a [letter to the editor](#), signed by school board President Maritza Molina, spelling out the 54-year-old leader's accomplishments at the district since he arrived six years ago.

They include steering the once-insolvent school system to financial stability, posting gains on test scores, passing construction bonds to replace crumbling facilities and widening the array of academic offerings to students at the district's three comprehensive high schools — Lawndale, Leuzinger and Hawthorne.

"As elected trustees of this district, we are committed to the best interests of the students and have seen first hand the changes to students' lives resulting from the policies and commitments we have made under Mr. Fernandez's leadership and are gratified by this success," states the letter, which was posted on the Daily Breeze website Friday and will run in Sunday's print edition.

The letter was written in response to a Sunday story detailing Fernandez's contract, which includes a bevy of perks and benefits that added nearly \$400,000 to his \$271,000 base salary in calendar year 2013. Although about \$215,000 of that amount was the product of a one-time expense, the contract grants Fernandez a 9 percent raise annually. It also allowed him to take a \$910,000 loan from the district at 2 percent interest to purchase a home in affluent Ladera Heights. He has 40 years to pay it off.

The letter does not dispute any facts in the story, but defends the process by which the contract was approved.

"The superintendent's compensation package was vetted by the District's attorneys, submitted for review to the L.A. County Office of Education and made public and approved at a properly noticed public meeting," the letter states. "Regrettably, concerns about the superintendent's compensation package have distracted from the District's core mission of educating our children."

District officials did not respond to a request from the Daily Breeze for further elaboration. The public, meanwhile, has not yet had a chance to weigh in at a public forum. The district canceled its board meeting that had been scheduled for Tuesday due to a lack of a board quorum. (The meeting was canceled prior to the Sunday story.) The next regular board meeting is scheduled for March 11.

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Meanwhile, Jack Foreman, the president of the teachers union and an outspoken critic of Fernandez's contract, said he agrees that the district has made gains under Fernandez's watch.

“But that’s still no excuse as to why he would get this kind of compensation,” he said. “Also, one of the ways he’s getting this compensation is because of the programs that have been cut.”

Such programs, he said, include adult education, home economics classes, counselors, foreign language classes, and — perhaps most notably — Centinela Valley’s inclusion in a regional occupation center that gives career-technical training to students across the South Bay in areas such as auto mechanics, cosmetology, veterinary science, medical assisting and other vocations.

Among the claims made in the letter is that the district, under Fernandez’s leadership, was able to stabilize the financial outlook of a district so broke it had been assigned a financial overseer in 2008 by the Los Angeles County Office of Education. In 2009, one year after Fernandez had taken the helm, the oversight of the district ended.

The letter also lists several statistics meant to reflect the academic progress under Fernandez’s tenure. For instance, the percentage of students meeting federal proficiency standards since 2008 has increased by 45 percent in math and by 37 percent in English, it says.

Average daily attendance in the district has increased from 88 percent in 2007-08 to 92 percent in 2012-13. The district has also opened five small learning communities — known as academies — with two more to open next school year, “allowing the students to focus on curriculum based on their interests.”

Foreman didn’t dispute these points. But he said the teachers, too, deserve to be awarded financially for the successes. He noted that Centinela Valley teachers this year have been offered just 1 percent, when teachers in surrounding districts such as Torrance, Lawndale, Hawthorne and Santa Monica have all received raises this year of 4 percent or higher.

He added that the benefits package for Centinela’s teachers rates among the least generous of the 80 school districts in Los Angeles County.

“Even the (Centinela Valley) principals haven’t gotten raises,” Foreman said. “They’ve gotten what we get. Nor, as I understand, have the other assistant superintendents — the other cabinet people. It’s all him.

“This district is not called the Jose Fernandez district,” he said. “This is the Centinela Valley district and we are a whole community of educators that are working hard to turn things around.”



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