

## Centinela Valley school district surprises teachers union with substantial raise offer

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### Centinela Valley school district surprises teachers union with substantial raise offer

Just days after the head of the Centinela Valley school district teachers union blasted Superintendent Jose Fernandez over his extraordinary compensation package, district officials offered teachers their largest raise in at least a decade this week.

The tentative agreement calling for a 4.1 percent pay hike follows months of deadlock between the union and the district, which has been swirling in controversy over Fernandez's salary and benefits package of \$663,000 in the 2013 calendar year. Union leaders had publicly expressed frustration at what they said was the district's initial offer of 1 percent when surrounding districts — buoyed by a brighter economic outlook — have been getting 4 percent or better this year.

That frustration was replaced with delight after this week's surprise development.

"The teachers are very, very happy," said Jack Foreman, president of the Centinela Valley Secondary Teachers Association. "Even though we've had a tough couple of weeks in the district."

Both sides say the tentative agreement — which will cost the district \$2.1 million in salary and benefit increases — came after an amicable meeting despite the turbulence rattling the district serving Lawndale, Leuzinger and Hawthorne high schools.

The controversy began with a Feb. 9 article in the Daily Breeze revealing not only Fernandez's compensation package, but also the fact that he took out a \$910,000 loan at 2 percent interest from the school district to purchase a home in Ladera Heights for the same amount.

The school district responded to the initial Daily Breeze story with a Feb. 14 letter to the editor detailing its accomplishments under Fernandez's watch, noting Centinela Valley's healthier financial standing and recent academic improvements.

In response, Foreman said while he agrees with the contention that the district has made some gains under Fernandez's watch, the gains in no way justified his compensation. He also criticized the district for what he said was its 1 percent offer, noting that districts in Torrance, Lawndale, Hawthorne and Santa Monica had all received raises this year of 4 percent or higher.

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

On Tuesday — the first day of the school week due to the Monday holiday — the district surprised Foreman and other union leaders with the new overture.

The offer, a 4.1 percent raise retroactive to July 2013, would come on top of a 1 percent raise that already took effect for the teachers in July.

If approved by the teachers and the school board, the one-year deal also would include a significant contribution to the teachers' medical benefits package, bringing it out of the bottom quadrant of all elementary and high school districts in Los Angeles County and closer to the average.

Fernandez did not respond to requests for comment. But Bob Cox, the district's assistant superintendent of human resources, said Tuesday's meeting had been scheduled in January, well before the first story ran in the Daily Breeze. It was the seventh session since bargaining began in October.

"I don't think the timing had anything to do with anything published in the newspaper," he said.

He added that, prior to this week, the roughly 320 teachers in Centinela Valley Union High School District had received a 1.75 percent increase last year as well as the 1 percent raise before the 2013-14 school year began.

In comparison to other local districts, Cox argued, Centinela Valley teachers have fared well in recent years, noting that they were among the only teachers in the area who were spared the pain of having to take furlough days.

Thanks to a recent overhaul in how California school districts are funded, the district's \$57 million general-fund budget is expected to grow. Under the initiative authored by Gov. Jerry Brown, the state will shift considerably more dollars to school districts serving larger-than-average shares of disadvantaged students. Centinela stands to gain from this shift, as more than 70 percent of its 6,600 students are poor enough to receive free or reduced-priced lunches.

When the district made its offer Tuesday afternoon, Foreman faced another uncomfortable dilemma related to the newspaper. He had just submitted a sharply worded letter to the editor, reiterating his agreement that the district has made some gains but blasting Fernandez's employment contract as "crafty," "opaque" and "off the charts."

Foreman said he decided not to alter it. The article was posted on the Daily Breeze website the next day, and appeared in Thursday's print edition.

"Let us be clear," he wrote, "while Centinela Valley staff were being laid off by the dozens, and we were sacrificing and watching programs be cut to the bone, our superintendent was leading a life of opulence — all paid for out of Centinela Valley coffers."

Beginning teachers in Centinela currently start in the low-\$40,000 range, and top out at \$101,000 after 30 years. Under the new deal, the starting salary would bump up to the mid-\$40,000 range up to \$105,000. It would also speed up the process of getting to the top level by two years.

The offer would increase the benefits cap from \$7,050 to \$10,000. That provision doesn't kick in until the 2014-15 school year, Cox said.

The school board is expected to vote on whether to ratify the agreement at its next meeting on March 11.

Foreman said this would be the largest raise Centinela teachers have ever received, save for a statewide 11 percent boost given to all public schoolteachers in California by Gov. Gray Davis in the early 2000s.

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