

Residents confront Centinela Valley school board over Superintendent Jose Fernandez's \$663,000 in compensation last year

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Lawndale resident Yvette Lindner speaks to members of the Centinela Valley Union High School District , during an emergency meeting at the Centinela Valley Center for the Arts. Members of the public spoke about Superintendent Jose Fernandez amassed \$663,000 in total compensation last year. ...

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The Centinela Valley school board took a drubbing Tuesday night from residents of Lawndale and Hawthorne furious about recent reports in the Daily Breeze detailing how Superintendent Jose Fernandez collected \$663,000 in compensation last year.

The occasionally raucous meeting, which drew more than 100 people, marked the first time the public was allowed to address the five-member board of the district serving

three high schools — Lawndale, Leuzinger and Hawthorne — since the series of stories began running Feb. 9.

“I can’t believe in the post-Bell era of high compensation that my own school district was paying an enormous salary to the superintendent,” said longtime Lawndale resident Cynthia Mosquada, prompting loud cheers. “I hope this board makes a change. If you don’t, the people here will be campaigning in the next election and we will” make a change.

In response to the residents, board members voiced a range of sentiments. They expressed regret, pleaded ignorance, defended the district’s progress under Fernandez, and hinted that changes to the contract will be made.

“When the article came out, I reflected back and said: ‘This amount is large but the \$271,000 was what we voted on,’ said board member Hugo Rojas, referring to the amount the district has cited as Fernandez’s base salary. “I know my colleagues personally, that we would not knowingly give that high a salary.”

At that point, someone in the audience yelled: “Ignorance is bliss.”

Rojas continued: “I am embarrassed, yes. I take passion in what I do. Contrary to what you hear in the media, we have to find facts behind what we’re looking at. And we’re going to be looking at this contract here and taking a lot of considerations.”

Four of the five current board members — Rojas, Rocio Pizano, Gloria Ramos and President Maritza Molina — were on the panel that unanimously approved Fernandez’s employment contract in late 2009. The contract includes a bevy of perks and benefits that added nearly \$400,000 to his base salary in calendar year 2013. Although \$215,000 of that came from 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.

Danielle Sevilla, a lifetime resident of Lawndale resident, said: “It’s with great embarrassment that I say I would not send my children to Leuzinger High School.

“It’s unacceptable that the superintendent was paid more than \$600,000. The money should be put where it’s clearly needed most, the students. You’ve taken advantage of the people least able to advocate for themselves.”

Also weighing in Tuesday night were leaders of both the teachers union and classified union serving nonteaching employees.

“Many of the things you said before were a lie,” said Cesar Perez, president of the classified union. “We were told, ‘There is no money, there is no money.’ We had to basically beg for crumbs.”

Teachers union President Jack Foreman said that while he supports the bond measures passed by voters in 2008 and 2010 and the school construction they’ve paid for to date, he is upset about Fernandez’s contract.

“We didn’t work this hard so Mr. Fernandez can get this kind of compensation. This contract that was passed just was wrong,” he said.

Board President Molina, who is still in her 20s, said the district has come a long way since she attended Lawndale High School.

“We’ve beat the odds by putting our financial house in order during a recession,” she said. “Disciplinary problems are down. We can go on and on with all the achievements and accomplishments. ... I want to personally thank my superintendent for his efforts. We’ve done a pretty amazing job these past six years with a team effort.”

Hawthorne school board member Alex Monteiro, who made a point to say he was addressing the board as a resident and taxpayer, praised the board for the new buildings that have gone up at the high schools with proceeds from the bond measures. But he pleaded with the board not to seek another bond measure, saying he feels overtaxed by the other bond measures as well as a parcel tax approved by voters in the district last year.

“To be thinking about another bond is going to hurt us,” he said. Monteiro added that taxes at the Hawthorne Moose Lodge, where he works as an administrator, have gone up by more than \$2,000 due to the parcel tax alone.

“I’m here to beg you, think about the residents, think about the businesses,” he said.

Resident David Dinnel said if the board votes to put another bond measure on the ballot, “Who here is going to be with me, fighting this every step of the way?”

Fernandez declined to address any of the complaints about his compensation package, choosing instead to express his appreciation to the board for its support and touting his accomplishments.

“I want to thank the board for their support,” he said, over catcalls coming from a few members of the audience. “I want to thank residents in the area who voted for the bonds that funded new buildings, new science labs.

“I do hear you. I’ve listened very carefully and I will sit and work with the board on your concerns. I want to thank you all for coming here and expressing your concerns. I want to thank you all again. Good evening.”