

## Embattled Centinela Valley school district Superintendent Jose Fernandez gives himself pay cut

By Rob Kuznia, *The Daily Breeze*  
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### Embattled Centinela Valley school district Superintendent Jose Fernandez gives himself pay cut

**Facing a crowd angered by his \$663,000 compensation package last year, Centinela schools chief says he'll cut perks to bring salary down to \$295,00**



Kicking off a wild school board meeting that drew some 300 furious residents, Centinela Valley high school district Superintendent Jose Fernandez — who has come under intense scrutiny for a compensation package that amounted to \$663,000 last year — announced he would voluntarily cut many of the perks embedded in his contract, bringing his salary to \$295,000.

Although Fernandez said the amount of last year's total compensation — which includes perks and benefits — has been exaggerated by the media, he nonetheless offered to forfeit a bevy of benefits, most notably the annual 9 percent raise embedded in his contract as a bonus for longevity.

"These are significant give-backs," he said, over a rising chorus of jeers. "I hope they reassure the public and the board that I'm being reasonable."

The five-member board and superintendent overseeing four high schools in Hawthorne and Lawndale have been buffeted by criticism that has only intensified since the Daily Breeze first reported on Fernandez's compensation package on Feb. 9. In addition to his pay and benefits, Fernandez also took a \$910,000, low-interest loan from the school district to purchase a home in affluent Ladera Heights for the same amount.

Last week, in response to the controversy, state Assemblyman Al Muratsuchi, D-Torrance, proposed a bill that seeks, among other things, to assign more responsibility to the Los Angeles County Office of Education to police excessive compensation packages for school leaders.

Fernandez's gesture Tuesday night did little to quell public outrage over his employment contract, which was unanimously approved in 2009 by the five board members, four of whom remain on the panel.

Dozens of speakers — many of them students from Hawthorne, Leuzinger and Lawndale high

schools — stepped up to the microphone in the Centinela Valley Center for the Arts in Lawndale and excoriated Fernandez and the board. Many called on them to resign.

“You serve us, because we have elected you to serve at our pleasure,” said Danielle Sevilla, a resident in the district. “Do not put this community through a costly and traumatic recall process. Do the right and honorable thing and step down.”

Several speakers came to the board bearing props. One student placed a broken-down computer upon the stage, saying it was from the computer lab at Leuzinger High.

In a surreal moment, early on in the meeting, a livid Lawndale resident named Jay Gould threw a fistful of dollar bills at the board on the stage, shouting that all they care about is money. For hours afterward, the dollar bills lay strewn across the stage after speaker after speaker took the microphone to lambaste the board.

“You are the only superintendent who doesn’t work the whole school year — you get 60 days of vacation, while the rest of us who pay your salary get two weeks,” said Hawthorne resident Kristel Lindner. “You can say all you want that you’ve done a great job, but buildings don’t teach students. Last school board meeting you said we should have come sooner and these problems could have been fixed sooner.”

Among the many students to address the board was Lawndale High student Fatima Alvarez.

“Our parents work two to three jobs to take care of us ... and they expect you to do your job,” she said to loud cheers. “It is not nice to be corrupt, it is not fair for us.”

Fernandez argued that the Daily Breeze was misleading by publishing the total amount of his compensation package in calendar year 2013, rather than the 2012-13 school year.

“It is very misleading,” he said. “I’m the victim of that.”

However, when the Daily Breeze asked officials from the Los Angeles County Office of Education for the total compensation of several area superintendents, the agency responded by sending W-2 forms for the calendar year 2013, saying that was the way the agency calculates total compensation. The total amounts for the leaders of Torrance, Redondo Beach and Palos Verdes school districts were all in the \$200,000s. The total compensation for Fernandez exceeded \$663,000.

Toward the beginning of the meeting Tuesday evening, Lorena Gonzalez — the newest member of the board — asked the audience why she doesn’t see any of them attend regular school board meetings to commend students for their academic accomplishments.

She was shouted down by the angry crowd and gave up on trying to finish her thought.

Several speakers later addressed the comment when addressing the board.

“Your comment, Ms. Gonzalez, is highly offensive to me,” said resident Melanie Bell. “I take it personally. I have a reason I’m not here. I was working and am trying to raise good citizens in this

community.”

Gonzalez later apologized to that parent.

“You’re absolutely right, we cannot always be here,” said Gonzalez, a banking executive and a mother of four students who attended district schools. “I work 10-hour shifts as well.”

Gonzalez noted that she has been on the board just two years, though she did not point out that she wasn’t among the board members who approved Fernandez’s contract.

“There is a lot to learn,” she said. “It’s not an excuse, and I’m not excusing myself.”

In his comments, board member Hugo Rojas struck a contrite tone.

“I’m sorry to everyone that you have to be here, and that we have to be in this room dealing with this matter,” he said. “That is my apology to you.”

Like she did in the previous board meeting, President Maritza Molina came to Fernandez’s defense.

“I am pleased that Superintendent Fernandez is ready to voluntarily and unilaterally take the pay cuts he has outlined tonight,” she said. “This is a good sign that the superintendent is listening to the concerns of the public and of this board. It is a sign of progress and we will be carefully watching as he makes good on his promises.”

However, she added, the superintendent’s voluntary concessions are “not the end of the story...As far as I am concerned, all elements — let me repeat, all elements — of that compensation package must be on the table during our negotiations.”

*Staff writer Rebecca Kimitch contributed to this article.*

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