

Embattled Centinela Valley Superintendent Jose Fernandez placed on paid leave

By Rob Kuznia , The Daily Breeze

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In this Feb. 25, 2014 file photo, Superintendent Jose Fernandez listens to public comments during a Centinela Valley Union High School District emergency meeting at the Centinela Valley Center for the Arts in Lawndale, Calif. Members of the public and board members spoke about Fernandez amassing \$663,000 in total compensation last year. On April 9, 2014, the school board voted to place Fernandez on paid administrative leave. (Photo by Stephen Carr/Torrance Daily Breeze)

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The Centinela Valley school board on Wednesday night placed Superintendent Jose Fernandez on paid administrative leave, saying an investigation needs to be conducted with regards to his extraordinary compensation package.

The decision was made in closed session at a hastily called meeting that was scheduled little more than 24 hours in advance. Following the closed-door session, which lasted the better part of three hours, board President Maritza Molina made the announcement to the 20 or so people who remained in a mostly empty auditorium. The vote was unanimous.

Fernandez and the board have been under fire since the Daily Breeze reported two months ago that the superintendent's employment contract enabled his total compensation to balloon to \$663,000 last year. It also allowed him to take a low-interest, \$910,000 loan from the district to purchase a home in Ladera Heights.

The contract was initially approved by the school board in late 2009. Four members of that board — Molina, Hugo Rojas, Gloria Ramos and Rocio Pizano — are still on the panel, and voted Wednesday to put Fernandez on leave.

Fernandez was on the dais before he and the board went into closed session around 7:15 p.m. When the board reconvened at 10 p.m., Fernandez wasn't there.

Most members of the audience were unmoved by the gesture.

"Just putting him on paid leave — he can sit at home and you're paying him?" said Hawthorne resident Kristel Lindner. "Fire him."

Also on the agenda for Wednesday night's meeting was an item to enter into a contract with the law firm Atkinson, Andelson, Loya, Ruud & Romo. However, a motion to hire the firm died for lack of a second..

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Before the board went into closed session, Molina said the district was considering the firm to “handle these matters” because it doesn’t have a conflict of interest with the district.

Though Centinela is made up of just three comprehensive high schools and a continuation school in Hawthorne and Lawndale, Fernandez’s payout in 2013 was more than double that of his peers in larger neighboring South Bay districts.

His total compensation even eclipsed that of John Deasy, superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation’s second-largest school system. Deasy’s base salary is \$330,000 this school year and his gross compensation is just shy of \$390,000, according to the LAUSD. But the district enrolls more than 650,000 students while Centinela Valley serves about 6,600.



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