

Centinela Valley school board fires embattled Superintendent Jose Fernandez

By Rob Kuznia, *The Daily Breeze*
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For-cause termination to avoid buyout clause in embattled chief's contract



The Centinela Valley school board Tuesday night voted to fire Superintendent Jose Fernandez, ending a five-month chapter that began with revelations that the leader of the tiny school district might have been among the nation's best-compensated public servants.

The unanimous vote to oust Fernandez happened in the closed-session portion of the board meeting. President Hugo Rojas announced the decision as board members convened for open session immediately afterward.

"After receiving advice from legal counsel regarding the issue, the board made a unanimous direction to counsel to implement the administrative procedures outlined under section 7D of Superintendent Fernandez's employment agreement regarding termination for cause," he said, drawing applause from the sparse audience of maybe 20 people.

Also clapping behind the dais was school board member Gloria Ramos.

It isn't clear exactly what Fernandez did wrong. But reports by this news organization that his compensation last year exceeded \$663,000 spurred public outcry, criminal investigations and even an attempt to change state law to prevent "[excessive school superintendent compensation packages](#)."

An investigative services company has been reviewing the case to determine if the board can find evidence of wrongdoing on Fernandez's part so the district can terminate him for cause, thereby avoiding the 18-month buyout clause enshrined in his contract. By some estimates, that buyout clause would cost the district serving three comprehensive high schools in Hawthorne and Lawndale about \$500,000.

Fernandez's removal from the post has been incremental. The board put him on paid leave in April as the controversy was heating up. In May, the board revoked his pay and hired the investigative services company, Risk Control Strategies, which employs a bevy of ex-FBI agents.

The board as of this week had not viewed RCS's report, but on Tuesday night the trustees were apparently briefed about the findings by attorneys.

Rojas on Tuesday night did not elaborate publicly on what they found, saying the board was advised by legal counsel not to field questions from the media.

Separately, the FBI and the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office have opened [criminal probes](#) that could grind on for years, sources say.

Although the audience applauded the board's move on Tuesday, a few speakers said they believe the

board, too, should be held accountable.

“There was definitely cause and we all know that,” said Hawthorne resident Marian Thomas. “I also want to know when are you guys leaving? You had a fiduciary responsibility.”

Cesar Perez, president of the classified union representing nonteaching employees, said he believes others in the district have been complicit in what he called Fernandez’s “abuse of power.”

“Anybody who knew about this and allowed the superintendent to do what he did needs to be put on the chopping block,” he told the board. “It would send a message, not only to the state but the whole country that this cannot be happening. It is an abuse of power and that cannot be tolerated anymore.”

Diane Sambrano, an activist from Inglewood, said she and others had raised questions to the board about Fernandez’s contract before.

“This was a significant mistake that should not have been made before because you were forewarned,” she said.

In February, it came to light that even though Fernandez’s base salary amounted to around \$271,000, his contract was so loaded with perks he [amassed more than \\$663,000](#) in total compensation last year. That amount easily surpassed not only the comparable compensation of John Deasy, the leader of the Los Angeles Unified School District, but also of President Barack Obama.

And it doesn’t include the roughly \$100,000 a year the district was paying for his [two premium life-insurance policies](#), thereby bumping up his total compensation last year to \$763,000.

What’s more, Fernandez’s generous employment contract entitled him to an annual 9 percent raise, and enabled him to take a \$910,000 low-interest loan from the district to purchase a home in Ladera Heights.

But these goodies were enshrined in a contract that the school board approved in late 2009, according to district documents. That contract stipulated that Fernandez couldn’t be fired without a super-majority vote of four of five board members.

On Tuesday night, all five board members decided it was time for Fernandez to go.

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