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City's teachers 'worried about future'

By Maureen Magee and Helen Gao

STAFF WRITERS

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His supporters expressed vindication and pride. His critics were suspicious, angry and underwhelmed.

From classrooms to the boardroom, news of Alan Bersin's appointment by Gov. Arnold

Schwarzenegger as state education secretary and state school trustee spread quickly yesterday.

Speculation over Bersin's future had been rampant since the San Diego school

board bought out the last year of his contract for \$240,000 about three months ago. He had been scarce at the Normal Street district headquarters and missed the past three board meetings. Bersin, a finalist last year to head the Motion Picture Association of America, also was named earlier this week as a possible successor to San Diego Mayor Dick Murphy, who said Monday that he will step down.

The superintendent is set to leave the San Diego Unified School District June 30. He will start his new post in Sacramento the next day.

"I guess to his credit, he has overcome a well-deserved challenging time in San Diego," said Barry Bernstein, one of more than a dozen school principals stripped of their management duties in a 1999 personnel shake-up that's being challenged in the courts. "Perhaps he can have learned from his experience and can move ahead in a positive way."

Bernstein and his demoted colleagues won a lawsuit against the district contesting their reassignments. The case has been appealed.

These days, Bersin's popularity has grown among principals – 84 percent of whom were hired under him.

"Alan is a favorable choice for the job. He has shown he is capable of making changes," said Kelly Peacock Wright, principal at King Elementary School. "He also made some errors – by his own admission and he's very open about that. This is good news."



PEGGY PEATTIE / Union-Tribune

San Diego school board President Luis Acle said Alan Bersin's ties to city schools would only help when the district lobbies for more money in Sacramento.

Under Bersin, standardized test scores have improved most significantly in elementary grades. Supporters also credit Bersin with bringing a consistent approach to literacy and math instruction throughout the district.

However, since he was hired in 1998, Bersin has clashed with the teachers union and parent groups.

Some parents complain that Bersin has all but silenced their voice in the district. Others say back-to-basics education strategies have, among other things, robbed their children of a comprehensive education and left schools a mess because budget cuts eliminated gardeners and custodial crews.

Teachers complain that changes forced on them stripped them of classroom aides.

"Teachers can't believe it. We are worried about the future," said Barbara Scott, a longtime teacher at Gage Elementary School. "Alan Bersin is a dictator who never took the opinion of the classroom teacher. The morale is a big deal; we never got any respect from the superintendent."

If angry teachers and parents were the thorns in Bersin's side, his new appointments may be just the protection he needs. It's unlikely he will have as much contact with those on the front line of education.

"The whole position of secretary of education is total useless bureaucracy," said Terry Pesta, president of the San Diego Education Association, which represents the district's 9,000 teachers. "He made only modest gains here in student achievement, he's totally demoralized the employees and he's disregarded the community."

School board members learned of Bersin's appointments yesterday morning when the superintendent called to inform them.

Board President Luis Acle said Bersin's ties to city schools would only help the district when district representatives go to Sacramento to lobby for funding.

"It's very positive to know someone well enough to have him return our calls," Acle said. "There would be some advantage to the fact that he knows this district and will be able to explain the position of this district."

Trustee Mitz Lee said she knew instinctively that Bersin would be the right replacement for Richard Riordan as education secretary.

"The governor has been pushing charters and school choice," she said. "Alan Bersin is very close to the business side, the charter movement and the choice movement."

Although news of Bersin's new job came as a surprise to many at the district, administrators have been getting by without him for some time.

According to insiders, Bersin has been largely absent from the district in the past month, leaving Deputy Superintendent Leslie Faussett to sit in on school board meetings and attend public functions on his behalf.

Bersin said he was on spring vacation with his children and traveling on behalf of district business. He said he will continue to be engaged in district affairs and assist with the transition.

"We have an organization that functions. I intend to fulfill my contract. There is a very strong management team," Bersin said. "The organization is, of course, functioning. No person is indispensable."

School board trustee Shelia Jackson also emphasized that the district is doing fine despite Bersin's impending departure and the lack of a successor.

"The stability of the district rests on the backs of the school board, the school board trustees and the district staff," she said. "The stability of the district is not based on one person."

The school board has promised to find a new superintendent before school starts in September.

After discussing the matter behind closed doors yesterday, Acle said the board might announce plans for an interim superintendent as early as next week. Faussett is considered a strong candidate for the job, according to district insiders.

Over the past several weeks, a consulting firm hired to help with the search has held about 50 meetings in the community to get input from residents, teachers, administrators, business leaders, governmental leaders and other stakeholders. About 400 people have participated.

The firm surveyed participants about characteristics they would like to see in the new superintendent. The surveys also asked respondents to list what they value in the district and what issues they see confronting public education.

The findings will be presented to the school board Tuesday. Based on the superintendent profile built by the firm, the board will determine the selection criteria.

Regarding the search so far, Acle said, "We are very optimistic."

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