

EDITORIAL: State Center board is at risk of losing public's trust after Deborah Blue's ouster

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By The Fresno Bee Editorial Board

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The public knows only that Deborah Blue will retire as the leader of State Center Community College District in June and then move to something called "chancellor emeritus" for another year while receiving her full salary of \$225,000 a year and benefits.

The district has more than 26,665 students. It operates in a region of more than 5,500 square miles and serves a population of about 1 million people.

So when the district board of trustees, on a split vote, forces out a chancellor with many supporters, the public wants to know the board's reasoning.

Citizens deserve that, as trustee Eric Payne said Tuesday night before a majority of his colleagues voted to amend Blue's contract during a board meeting in Reedley.

"We owe the public more than this ambiguous process," Payne said.

Payne and trustee Dorothy Smith voted against changing the contract. Board President Patrick Patterson joined trustees Isabel Barreras, Richard Caglia and John Leal in voting to end Blue's leadership of the district. Trustee Ronald H. Nishinaka abstained from the vote.

We understand that personnel matters are often sensitive, but Blue's position puts her in the public eye. Without an explanation from the board, citizens are left to guess why she essentially was fired. People who attended the meeting were bewildered by the board's vote.

Tuesday's meeting was called at the last minute on Monday. In addition, as The Bee's Hannah Furfaro explained in a story on Wednesday: "The announcement came after more than two hours of private talks among the board trustees — plus several more hours spent during two special closed-door meetings held since January. Board members have been mum about the meetings, citing state laws that prevent them from discussing personnel matters. None acknowledged the meetings were about Blue."

If the board continues its silence, it risks losing the public's trust.

More than 100 professors, administrators and friends of Blue attended Tuesday's meeting. She was described as a "transparent leader" and a "role model" for women. It was pointed out that Blue helped two of the district's colleges secure their accreditations after being placed on "warning status."

The board may have legitimate reasons for giving a "golden parachute" to Blue, who was hired following a public interview process to succeed the retiring Tom Crow as chancellor in July 2010.

But we haven't heard even a single explanation, and that is troubling because transparency is vital to good government.

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