

## Selma Unified board votes to oust superintendent over community opposition

By Hannah  
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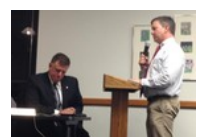
Selma Mayor Scott Robertson, at the podium, speaks in support of Selma Unified Superintendent Mark Sutton at Tuesday night's school board meeting. HANNAH FURFARO — The Fresno Bee

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SELMA — “Recall” — that was Selma community members’ message for three Selma Unified school trustees Tuesday night after the district’s school board voted 3-2 to oust Superintendent Mark Sutton during a special board meeting.

Trustees John Lorona, Gilbert Lopez and Roger Orosco voted to remove Sutton, with trustees Paul Green and Jennifer Winter voting no. The decision was made behind closed doors after two hours of community comments. Board members did not discuss why Sutton was axed, though many suspected longtime tensions with the board president were the reason.

Tensions flared in the tiny board room before the vote, where several dozen people spoke out against the controversial move to remove Sutton, who has led the district since 2007.



With more than two dozen squeezed into the room, and about 200 more overflowing into the lobby and chilly outdoor corridor, one by one community members, teachers, parents and even the city's mayor, Scott Robertson, took to the podium pleading with the five-member board to keep Sutton.

"You are literally tearing the community in half," Hector Sanchez, a 20-year Selma resident and father of two Selma High graduates, told the board. "I don't know Mr. Sutton all that well, but from what I'm hearing, this is not something we need to be doing."

The show of support came amid a swift move late last week by Lorona, the board president, to schedule the special Tuesday night meeting with only one agenda item listed for discussion: the discipline or dismissal of a school employee.

Although Sutton wasn't listed as the person under review — state law protects employee privacy when it comes to personnel issues — news of his potential removal filtered quickly throughout Selma's school halls and neighborhoods.

The flood of attendees prompted trustee Green to ask his colleagues to move the meeting to a larger venue, like the school cafeteria as one person in the crowd proposed, a move that was squashed on a 3-2 vote with Green and Winter voting yes.

Before the board headed into closed session to discuss Sutton's contract, many who spoke told the board they were ashamed, embarrassed and frustrated by its plans.

Louis Franco, who leads a small education foundation in Selma, called on the board's newest member, trustee Gilbert Lopez, to explain how he could kick out the superintendent with only a month of experience as a board member.

Several others appealed directly to Lopez, who was elected into his first term in November, to support Sutton.

"You need to think for yourself," said Sara Rodriguez, a retired administrative assistant. "We are taxpayers, we pay your salaries, we put you in these positions, and we can take you out of these positions."

Some threatened a recall campaign, while others, including Selma High sophomore Tony Dias, accused the board of declaring war on Sutton — and the entire community. Speakers were each given three minutes to talk, with public comment extending from 6:30 p.m. until past 8:30 p.m.

Only a few spoke out against Sutton, with one man calling him a bully and accusing him of supporting employees who used racial slurs toward himself and family members.

Sutton sat at the board table silently with his eyes cast downward, smiling at times when a speaker shared a personal story. Several noted he's not the type to work from behind his desk — many said they know him as a friendly face and hard worker who has a solid presence in the Selma community.

When the vote came in, people inside the room and crowded outside booed the decision, with many chanting "recall, recall" as trustees exited the building.

Sutton and his family quietly left before the decision was announced.

The move will result in a more than \$250,000 buyout — or 18 months of pay, plus health benefits. The board did not discuss a timeline for finding a replacement.

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