

Turnover in school superintendents has heads spinning across Fresno, Madera counties

By Hannah
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School leaders under fire

- Two superintendents — Selma Unified's Mark Sutton and Golden Valley Unified's Andrew Alvarado — were fired by their district's school boards on Tuesday night.
- A third superintendent, Central Unified's Mike Berg, announced his retirement this week after more than 30 years in public education.
- Raisin City Elementary Superintendent Anna Ramirez is taking heat for a past felony offense — and because she doesn't have an administrative credential.

It's been a tumultuous week for local school superintendents.

Turmoil flickering at districts across Fresno and Madera counties came to a head with the firing of two superintendents. A third superintendent who leads the tiny Raisin City Elementary school district is taking heat from community members for a past felony conviction. And a fourth, Central Unified Superintendent Mike Berg, announced his intention to retire at the end of 2015.

Tuesday was the flashpoint in the swirl of news. Two superintendents — Selma Unified's Mark Sutton and Golden Valley Unified's Andrew Alvarado — were both ousted on 3-2 votes at board meetings that night. Both firings happened without public explanation and over staunch community opposition.

What seemed to be the common thread in both cases was a switch-up in school board members and leadership following the 2014 election. In Selma's case, first-term trustee Gilbert Lopez joined two veterans to kick out Sutton. And the two new board members elected in Golden Valley in 2014 each voted in the majority to ax Alvarado.

California Department of Education officials don't track whether school board turnover has any effect on superintendents' job security, spokesman Giorgos Kazanis said.

Fresno County school superintendents, past and present, say it's not unusual to see a shake-up in district superintendents following an election. But in both cases this week, and particularly in Selma Unified, officials say, such a swift move without much public reasoning from the board can be tough for communities to swallow — and not necessarily the smartest move for the district.

"Sometimes you have the right to do something, but it's not necessarily the right thing to do," Larry Powell, former Fresno County superintendent of schools, said .

Powell, who served as superintendent for Central Unified before taking the county superintendent's post, said Sutton's firing was understandably alarming for community members. Sutton had three years left on his contract and had received only positive reviews since he was hired in 2007.

"When you have a contract that is as long as Mark Sutton has, and a buyout of \$250,000, I don't know the taxpayers appreciate that kind of change being made," he said. "That's going to cost a lot of money at a time where we're just

recovering (economically).”

In Golden Valley Unified, located in Madera Ranchos, Alvarado’s buyout will cost the district \$135,699, school officials said Wednesday. Community members showed up by the hundreds to both Golden Valley and Selma school meetings Tuesday, pleading with the boards late into the evening to keep the educators. Golden Valley school board President Kathleen Crumpton said Thursday the trustees will appoint an interim superintendent at a future board meeting. Selma Unified board president John Lorona declined to comment on Thursday.

The moves come as a shock, Fresno County schools Superintendent Jim Yovino said, because few local school superintendents have left their positions in the past two years.

“Great stability is great for kids, so yes, that’s why I am concerned about the decisions,” he said.

There may be more reshuffling yet.

“There is a turnover of board members, and that could possibly happen,” Yovino said.

Though Central Unified’s school board was largely reconfigured following the November election — a slate of four new members who called themselves the “four horsemen” swept several veterans out of office — the situation there is markedly different, officials say.

Berg’s retirement was his choice, and came without a shove from the new trustees, board president Terry Cox said Wednesday.

“The board has not taken any action or delved into any conversation with Mike about his employment,” she said.

Berg alerted the seven-member board in January that he intended to retire, she said. Trustees this month will discuss a timeline for finding a replacement.

“Do we have the opportunity to hire someone now?” she said. “Do we wait until he’s done with his position? That’s going to be the discussions the board will have.”

Tensions in Raisin City

The superintendent of the one-school Raisin City Elementary district is facing blow-back of her own.

A small group of parents and people from outside the community are showing up weekly to picket the school’s Superintendent/Principal Anna Ramirez, who they say is unfit to lead the district since she has a felony on her record and no administrative credential.

Ramirez, who in 2013 was ordered to pay \$63,948 in restitution to her then-brother-in-law after pleading no contest to felony forgery, alerted the school board about her offense before she was hired, trustee Nancy Schwabenland said. At issue was Ramirez’s failure to repay about \$77,755, which she was loaned to buy a house.

The conviction didn’t send up red flags, Schwabenland said. Unlike a molestation or violent conviction, which by state law would automatically disqualify a candidate, Ramirez’s offense “has nothing to do with school, it has nothing to do with kids,” she said.

From the board’s perspective, Schwabenland said, Ramirez was closing the books on an old squabble dating back to 2002.

Ramirez did not answer several phone and email requests from The Bee over the past four weeks. School board president Anthony Monreal, who is also superintendent at Delano Unified, also did not answer several interview requests.

The issue has drawn interest from a few parents and a small group of outsiders, including Caruthers community member Ted Miller, who has protested several times outside the school calling for Ramirez's removal.

It's not against the law for a school board to hire a candidate with a felony record, but it's "just the kind of thing that makes you shake your head and say, what?" Miller said in a January interview.

Miller and others, including Sophia Aguilar from Lemoore, have taken up protesting at the school over the past few weeks. The pair met at a Raisin City school board meeting, Aguilar said.

Both said they're also upset because Ramirez doesn't have an administrative credential, which is required by state law for anyone who is a principal. Superintendents are not required to hold the credential.

"If you are a principal, you must have an administrative credential because you are in a position of evaluating employees," said Naj Alikhan, communications director for the Association of California School Administrators, who is not familiar with the case in Raisin City but could comment generally.

Yovino said it's standard for administrators in Ramirez's position — the dual role of superintendent and principal — to hold an administrative credential.

"But it all depends on what the district wants or needs," he said.

Not everyone is supporting the protests, and parents say the picketing has disrupted school and scares kids.

One parent, Elaine Reynoso, said she even called the Fresno County Sheriff's Office after witnessing the protests.

"My concern is the safety of our children," she said. "Our parents struggle trying to basically make ends meet out there and for them to try to drop their kids off and hear this, it's wrong."

Aguilar called the situation "unfortunate" but said "(Ramirez) is a confessed felon who is in charge of a school. Our picketing is done to increase the visibility of the situation to the community."

Schwabenland said there are no plans to review Ramirez's contract.

The turmoil is likely to continue in Raisin City. It's crackling in Selma and Golden Valley too, as school officials search for new leaders amid public outcry and signature-collecting for trustee recall elections.

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