

New Florida public school superintendent to receive record salary

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The Palm Beach County, Florida school board has unanimously approved a new contract for incoming school superintendent Robert Avossa, making him the highest paid superintendent in the state. With a base salary of \$325,000, the five-year contract will pay Avossa significantly more than outgoing superintendent Wayne Gent, who made \$236,000 annually as well as the Florida's current highest paid superintendent, Alberto Carvalho of Miami-Dade County, who earns \$318,000 per year.

In addition to the base salary, Avossa will be given a \$40,000 consulting fee for two and a half weeks of orientation prior to the start of his contract. Palm Beach County will also provide Avossa with a \$1,000 stipend each month for work-related expenses, a car and an extra \$24,000 annually to go into his retirement fund. Avossa's compensation will also include a \$1 million life insurance policy, a smart phone, a computer and other perks. Leaving aside the consulting fee and the material objects, this brings Avossa's total compensation to at least \$361,000 annually.

Avossa was initially offered a base salary of \$350,000, but agreed to reduce this amount by \$25,000 during the final negotiations with the school board in order to assuage the anger of Palm Beach County teachers, who are currently working without a contract and whose annual salaries average \$46,583. Starting salaries for new teachers in Palm Beach County are currently \$39,000, little more than 10 percent of Avossa's projected compensation.

The teachers have not received any pay increases during the last eight years, and the county school board is now considering giving "evaluation-based" raises to the highest-rated teachers. Teachers rated "highly effective" this year would receive a raise of \$1,200 and those rated just "effective" would get \$900. Teachers

hired before 2011 would automatically receive a \$900 raise annually unless they decide to opt in to the "merit-pay" plan.

In 2012, the Classroom Teachers Association, the union that represents Palm Beach County teachers, proposed that the county school board give its teachers "step" raises over the course of the next year in order to make up for past lost raises. The school board offered instead a single base salary raise, claiming that it needed to save money for other unionized employees including bus drivers and secretaries, but the union rejected this offer. Earlier in 2015, the union proposed automatic annual raises of \$1,200 for all teachers, but this was rejected by the district, which favors the performance-based pay scheme.

Avossa was previously the school superintendent in Fulton County, Georgia where he received permission to convert the county into a "charter district" and was then able to institute a number of reactionary measures. Protections were removed from the contracts of first-year teachers, allowing school administrators to fire them within the first 90 days of their employment. Avossa also gave school principals the power to suspend teachers without pay for up to 20 days without any appeal process. Avossa also established partnerships with several local churches, setting up a program where church members were allowed to furnish onsite counseling to students.

The record salary being prepared for Avossa is part of a wider statewide trend that gives school superintendents CEO-level compensation, arguing that this will improve school "performance." Robert Runcie of Broward County is paid \$284,000 annually, and Orange County Superintendent Barbara Jenkins is given \$250,000. The new superintendent in Hillsborough County, Jeff Eakins, receives an annual

compensation of \$225,000.

Palm Beach County teachers expressed anger when asked to comment on Avossa's compensation package. Boca Raton High School teacher Suzi Grbinich told the *Palm Beach Post* that she was insulted by Avossa's compensation. "We hear again, there's no money for teachers," she noted. "You have betrayed us with your empty words and worthless promises. ... Will the teachers ever earn what they deserve?"

Leslie Baldwin-Drinkovic, a West Palm Bay educator, wrote in a letter to the *Palm Beach Post* that "teachers are still waiting to hear when it will be their turns. We are the ones doing the heavy lifting every day, yet our budget boss, Mike Burke, tells us every year that the budget has no money for us. It is the Palm Beach County School District's time to give teachers a raise. We would appreciate a fair and lasting increase each year, as is customary in school districts across our nation."

With a student population of 186,000, Palm Beach County is the fifth largest school district in Florida and the twelfth largest in the United States. Avossa will be the district's third superintendent in the last decade.



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