

# Top dollar for schools' top dogs

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Being a school superintendent in Texas can be a lucrative job — the top salary in the state was \$322,000 in Dallas in 2003, according to Texas Education Agency data.

But for taxpayers, superintendents' salaries can be a contentious issue.

"The problem is that the money is coming from tax dollars. If it was a CEO of a private company, it would be different," said Anne Dixon, a former superintendent at Somerset School District.

So why have superintendents' salaries grown as much as 77 percent in the past five years?

Local school board members say rising enrollments, issues such as school safety and the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act have made the role of urban superintendents more demanding and complex than ever before.

Trustees also say finding solid superintendents is difficult, and there's more to their salaries than just the numbers.

For North East School District trustees, it was a vote of confidence and a defensive move to keep Richard Middleton after another district came raiding.

In 1997, trustees were blindsided by the news that Middleton was a finalist for the superintendent's job at a school district near Orlando, Fla.

"We were afraid that we were going to lose him, and that's when we raised his salary," said Molly Pruitt, a longtime NESD trustee. "Everybody thought it was horrible when we raised his salary, because ... he was one of the few (in Bexar County) earning that much."

Trustees proposed a new salary package, giving Middleton a \$45,000 raise and adding a contract clause forbidding him from accepting job interview invitations without telling the board. A violation would cost him \$50,000.

"The clause sends a message that we want him to stay," Pruitt said.

Middleton has brought stability to the district since he took the job in 1990, trustees said.

"He respects us as a board, but we also respect the incredible job that he has to do and has done," trustee Sandy Hughey said.

During a recent workday, Middleton, 56, drove around neighborhoods looking for signs of construction.

"You have to anticipate where the growth will take place," he said.

The district has been growing by about 1,600 students a year, and it has built 13 schools over the past decade.

Middleton's base salary also has grown, increasing 37 percent in five years, from \$183,450 in 1998-99 to \$252,000 in 2002-03, the sixth highest in the state.

Middleton, a NESD product who oversees a district of 55,580 students and a budget of about \$340 million, said he doesn't take his salary for granted.

"I know I'm a public servant. I serve the community and the board, and my job is to give the best advice I can provide," he said.

In 2002-03, the average base salary was \$83,310 for a Texas superintendent and \$150,000 in Bexar County, an analysis of TEA figures shows.

Nationwide, the average salary was \$170,024, the American Association of School Administrators said.

The demand for experienced administrators has pushed salaries up in recent years, said Bob E. Griggs, a former superintendent who now helps school districts hire them.

"It goes down to the old American way of supply and demand," Griggs said.

It also may come down to how good the relationship is between the administrator and the school board, parents, teachers and other administrators.

When it works well, as trustees say is the case with Middleton, school boards are eager to avoid losing their superintendent. But when the marriage is dysfunctional, it can cause turmoil, destroy morale and lead the district into financial disarray.

Before hiring Superintendent Rubén Olivárez, the San Antonio School District had a rocky relationship with his predecessor Diana Lam.

Although Lam was credited with raising test scores, she clashed with teacher organizations and had a

hostile relationship with many trustees.

Lam's contract was bought out in 1998 for \$781,000, and the board hired Olivárez to oversee the district, which has more than 50,000 students, 8,000 employees and a budget just over \$445 million.

"It has worked for us. He is very interactive and committed. He seems to have his handle on every aspect of education, and he gives us a lot more insight because of his TEA experience," said trustee Tom Lopez, noting Olivárez worked at TEA for several years.

On a recent Monday, Olivárez's day was already in full gear by the time he walked into a conference room at 9:46 a.m. to meet with his staff. He had revised the school board's agenda, read the newspaper, answered calls and responded to e-mail.

Since he took the reins three years ago, Olivárez, 57, has worked with his staff to implement new programs aimed at boosting academic performance and retaining students. He also worked diligently to improve the school district's finances, eliminating a \$24.9 million budget shortfall left from the Lam administration, Lopez said.

An early education program also is one of his efforts.

Shadowing Olivárez for a day is like being on a roller-coaster ride. He admits his schedule is hectic but says, "It is very rewarding when you go to a school and see the eyes of the children and you know they are learning."

Olivárez received \$230,587 in base pay in 2002-03, the 10th highest in the state. Last month, trustees evaluated Olivárez and gave him a raise that pushed his salary to \$273,305, an 18.5 percent increase. His contract calls for a minimum 7.5 percent salary increase annually.

The average base salary for superintendents in Texas increased 7 percent in 2002-03, according to a computer analysis by the San Antonio Express-News of 1,134 school districts and charter schools. Salaries for teachers have grown at a slower pace — 1.7 percent last year, a recent survey by the Texas Association of School Boards shows.

Superintendents have the luxury of negotiating their contracts, which is something teachers can't do, said Tom Cummins, president of the Bexar County Federation of Teachers.

He concedes teachers have expressed frustration over the disparities, but as a group they concentrate on other concerns, such as working conditions and extra duties.

When his staff didn't receive an increase this year, Northside School District Superintendent John Folks refused to take a raise, trustee Katie N. Reed said.

Folks, who is in his second year on the job, said he developed an instant rapport with trustees when they were courting him.

"I came to talk to the board twice, and we hit it off," said Folks, 55, who now leads the district with 71,500 students — the sixth largest in the state — and a \$714 million budget.

Folks' salary, at \$220,000, is 12th on the list of Texas superintendents.

"Salary, it's important. It is like everything else — you get what you paid for," Reed said. "In my opinion we are not going to let the salary kill the negotiations."

In comparison, a much smaller district in the state, with 20,000 students and a \$150 million budget, had the fourth-highest-paid superintendent last year. Carrol A. Thomas, who came to the Beaumont School District in 1995, makes \$281,567.

Residents weren't happy, but board members attribute the salary to the condition of the district at the time.

"We were a joke in the 1980s. The controversy in the district was constant, and the TEA had sent two monitors. It was ridiculous," said Martha Hicks, president of the board.

Trustees attribute many improvements to Thomas and say he unified a board divided along racial lines.

"He is a natural-born leader," Hicks said. "He has built a long-term trust with the trustees, and when he said he is to take care of something, it's done."

"The board sees his salary as an investment," she said.

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