

NEWS

Hermosa Beach School District to cut superintendent's pay

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In a cost-saving measure at a tiny school district struggling to maintain solvency, the new superintendent of the Hermosa Beach City School District will earn about \$40,000 less than her predecessor, even though she'll be taking on more responsibility.

Patricia Escalante, currently the principal of Hermosa Valley School – which serves grades three through eight – will take the top job at the high-performing district in July after less than a year in her current position.

Escalante's appointment comes at a time when the salaries of school leaders are being closely watched, due to an unrelenting state budget crisis that has wreaked havoc on education from kindergarten through college.

The pay cut for her position stands in marked contrast to the controversial raises given to at least three new presidents of the California State University system – among them the outgoing president of the California State University, Dominguez Hills – whose salaries have all been boosted by at least \$29,000, and in one case by \$100,000.

In her new post, Escalante will earn \$135,000. By comparison, her comparable predecessor, Bruce Newlin – who retired on Dec. 31 – made \$176,000. His salary schedule called for him to earn \$185,000 next school year, meaning the district will actually save about \$50,000 on her

In addition to making less money, Escalante will assume a second title, director of special education, taking over for Jen Camacho, who will move on from that post after this year. All told, the administrative streamline is expected to save the district about \$138,000 a year.

Escalante, who currently draws a salary of about \$107,000 as a principal, said she isn't bothered in the least by the reduction in pay at the top, or the added duties.

"I know the teachers have taken furlough days and have done it with a great deal of grace, and an understanding that we have to all contribute," she said. "I'm proud of the fact that, as a superintendent, that I'm contributing in my own way."

Due to its small size, the Hermosa district – which is composed of two schools, the K-2 Hermosa View and Hermosa Valley – is in danger of being hit disproportionately hard by the current budget crisis. Educators in Hermosa Beach and elsewhere say the situation could deteriorate further if California voters don't approve Gov. Jerry Brown's tax hike initiative in November.

Hermosa's budget has shrunk in recent years by about 15 percent. For the past year, school leaders there have taken proactive measures to stave off insolvency, even going so far as to study the possibility of dissolving the district altogether and merging it with the Manhattan Beach Unified School District or perhaps the Redondo Beach Unified School District. (That idea has since been placed on the back burner.)

The prognosis has been entirely self-generated: As far as the state and county are concerned, Hermosa's finances are sound.

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Now, in addition to reducing administrative costs, the district is looking at ways to generate revenue. Most immediately, it is gauging the public's appetite for a November parcel tax. The district has sent out a survey asking residents where they stand on the idea, and the results are expected to come in either later this month or early next.

In the recent past, Hermosa Beach voters have not taken kindly to the idea – they shot down a parcel tax attempt in 2008. That said, community donations have helped keep the district afloat, bringing in about \$900,000 a year, or roughly 10 percent of the district's general fund. (Last year, families were asked to donate \$1,000 per child to the public schools via the Hermosa Beach Education Foundation.)

Also, in a parallel effort to the parcel-tax survey, a committee is studying the viability of turning the district's two schools into charter schools. This would raise revenue because charter schools receive more money per-pupil from the state than elementary schools.

But Rasmussen seemed skeptical that this is the right path for Hermosa, whose schools boast some of the highest test scores around.

As for Escalante – a 40-year resident of Hermosa Beach – she's an example of a woman who didn't let her stint as a stay-at-home mother deter her from succeeding in the work world later in life. Now 60, Escalante earned her graduate degree in her 40s.

"My son and I were in college at the same time," she said in a phone interview, with a rueful chuckle.

Escalante, who taught for a while in the Hawthorne School District before having children, resumed her teaching career years later in Manhattan Beach Unified. Her administrative career began just nine years ago. Her ascent during that time was rapid: assistant principal of Horace Mann Middle School in Beverly Hills, principal of the K-8 El Rodeo School in Beverly Hills, and then principal of Hermosa Valley beginning this past fall.

Both of her sons attended Hermosa Valley School through eighth grade and she was an active participant in the Hermosa Valley PTO – which is similar to a PTA – as well as various committees to support the school.

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This has been a big year for Escalante, who said she recently became a grandmother.

"To come back to the (Hermosa) district has been a dream of mine," she said. "The decisions I have made professionally have always been measured against the goal, which was to come back. When I left the city to be an administrator in Beverly Hills it was appealing to me that they are a K-8 configuration because that's the configuration of Hermosa Beach. I've been planning and working and auditioning for this job a long time."

She earned her bachelor's from the USC and her master's in School Management and Administrative Credential from the University of La Verne.

Rasmussen had high praise for Escalante.

"She knows this community," he said. "She is an individual that is going to be a long-term superintendent and I believe she will do an outstanding job for the Hermosa Beach City School District."

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