

Olchefske resigns

Financial crisis brings down embattled schools chief

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1of3After weeks of controversy and a no-confidence vote by teachers, schools Superintendent Joseph Olchefske said yesterday he plans to step down Oct. 15. Gilbert W. Arias/Seattle Post-



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• • [Seattle Public Schools](#) Superintendent [Joseph Olchefske](#) announced his resignation yesterday, saying the \$34 million financial debacle that occurred under his watch created an environment so toxic it detracted from his ability to lead the district effectively.

"I was hoping that the public could move through this crisis and focus on the solution," Olchefske said. "What I've seen over the course of the last several months is this focus on divisiveness and acrimony and conflict, which I found was moving us away from our mission of what we're trying to accomplish with kids. ... I certainly saw that me staying here would not mitigate it."

Olchefske's future with Seattle Public Schools has been in question since October, when the superintendent announced that the district had overspent this year's and last year's budgets by a total of \$34 million.

The reaction to that announcement was swift and intense. Olchefske faced outrage from parents, heckling at School Board meetings, multiple calls for his resignation and no-confidence votes

from teachers at numerous schools. But he continued to insist he would stay on the job and work to solve the problems.

A week and a half ago, the [Seattle Education Association](#) -- the union representing teachers, office staff and instructional assistants -- announced that 85 percent of members who participated in a no-confidence vote agreed to ask the School Board to fire Olchefske.

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Olchefske's resignation came two days before the scheduled release of a much-anticipated report from an independent auditor on the causes of the \$34 million budget gap, which has been blamed on poor accounting practices and communication breakdowns.

Some speculated that Olchefske's announcement was prompted by the audit results or the teachers union vote. But board members who have seen drafts of the audit, which will be delivered at a board meeting tomorrow, say it contains no bombshells and is not directly responsible for Olchefske's decision.

The superintendent said he decided to step down after consulting with School Board members and friends outside the district over the past couple of weeks. He said he hasn't seen the audit report, and he decided to announce his resignation before its release so the public does not think he's stepping down because of the audit.

"If I announced it after, regardless of at what juncture, it would be seen as a reaction to it," he said. "I've been pretty clear that this was a tremendous loss of financial discipline and control. I already know that that's (in the audit). My objective now in advance of the audit was to make sure people didn't view it as some reaction to something there that I wasn't expecting."

Nonetheless, said [Seattle School Board](#) Vice President [Steve Brown](#), the report inevitably will contain findings of fault that can be laid at the feet of the superintendent and that would make it even harder for the school system to move beyond the turmoil that has engulfed Olchefske since October.

"The issue of 'should he stay or should he go' has become enough of a distraction, or consumed enough energy that ... it may make more sense for him to remove himself from the equation so we can concentrate on the things we're supposed to concentrate on," Brown said. "Everything was getting sucked in there."

Brown and other board members agreed that the fiscal foul-up struck the blow that proved fatal for Olchefske's tenure, not only in itself but because it served as the vehicle for complaints unrelated to the budget dilemma.

The financial crisis quickly became a lightning rod for a broad range of gripes about everything from standardized report cards to Olchefske's leadership style and his hiring of principals. As rancorous public meetings illustrated, it was open season on the superintendent.

Brown, School Board President [Nancy Waldman](#) and board member [Jan Kumasaka](#) all said they were saddened by the resignation, and that it appeared Olchefske still enjoyed the support of a majority of board members. But none of the three argued strongly against the decision.

"I think he felt it was important to do the right thing," Kumasaka said.

The three said that two major school levies going before voters in February loom as a critical event for a district struggling with the effects of the budget errors and the expected loss of millions in state aid. Restoring voter confidence will require following through aggressively on the results of the audit, Brown said.

Former Seattle Schools Superintendent [John Stanford](#), who died of leukemia in 1998, hired Olchefske away from his private sector job as an investment banker to become the district's chief financial officer.

The board members credited Olchefske for sustaining Stanford's energizing vision for the public schools. They said that under his leadership, the district has improved test scores and dropout rates, advanced the district's system for school choice and attracted strong job applicants for openings.

Kumasaka singled out Olchefske's ability to push ahead on tough issues despite criticism, such as with firing incompetent principals, shifting budgeting authority from the central administration to individual schools and adopting a weighted financing formula that focuses more spending on students from poor families.

But Olchefske has his weaknesses, a couple of which were highlighted in his most recent performance review, Brown said: fiscal oversight and communication. "Those areas are still works in progress," Brown said.

[John Dunn](#), president of the Seattle Education Association, told reporters yesterday that Olchefske's departure is "an opportunity for the School Board to take action that will once again restore confidence in the board's ability to manage their budget responsibly. ... At this point, it was a matter of credibility and confidence in his leadership."

Reaction to yesterday's announcement was mixed among teachers and principals. [Kaaren Andrews](#), principal of the K-8 [Catharine Blaine School](#) in Magnolia, said she was "sick to her stomach" when she heard of Olchefske's resignation. Andrews left a job as principal in a California district to come to Seattle last fall because of the work under way in the city's schools, and she said Olchefske had much to do with that.

"He always said, 'Tight on the what, loose on the how,' and I think that is an incredibly forward-thinking, progressive thing for a city superintendent to say and to actually follow up with money, with support," she said.

But [Joyce Horvath](#), the parent of a Denny Middle School student, said Olchefske's loss of public confidence made it necessary for him to step down. "He may have had some great ideas to turn it around, but it was like a day late and a dollar short," she said.

Robert Femiano, a teacher at Arbor Heights Elementary, said Olchefske's resignation is "long overdue." The superintendent's lack of an educational background has been a sore spot with some teachers, including Femiano.

"It is somewhat bothersome not to have someone with some teaching background in that position," he said.

P-I staff stories

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