

Why They So Dislike Olchefske

The reasons are almost as numerous as the teachers, parents, and principals who wanted the superintendent ousted.

By Nina Shapiro

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Joseph Olchefske, investment banker and schools superintendent.

One thing you can say about Seattle Public Schools Superintendent Joseph Olchefske, he has a great poker face. Just last week, the 45-year-old superintendent was sitting at district headquarters looking surprisingly relaxed and explaining to me why he didnt intend to step down, despite the firestorm in the aftermath of financial mismanagement that produced a \$34 million shortfall. Clearly, this has

damaged my credibility, and I know that, he said. At the same time, Im committed to earning that back. He talked about the beginning of a new phase of his tenure, focused on healing, for which he intended to develop relationship-building skills.

But the next day he was off for a mini-vacation at his ranch in Cle Elum, and when he returned to work on Monday, he had some news: He intended to resign after all, giving the six months notice required by his contract. Ive been thinking about it for a few weeks, Olchefske says now. I just watched all the acrimony and divisiveness grow over the last six months. If my ongoing presence distracts us from focusing on kids, then Ive got to make a change.

Predictably, supporters pronounced themselves saddened while critics applauded. Regardless, Olchefske may have had little choice given the mounting crisis of confidence he faced. Once, Olchefske supporters could claim that dissatisfaction was confined to a vocal minority. No longer. The overwhelming expression of no-confidence by teachers, in a vote conducted by their union early this month, made that clear. Even Seattle Education Association head John Dunn, an Olchefske critic, was surprised when 85 percent of them voted in favor of seeing the superintendent ousted. I was

kind of awed by the consensus, Dunn says.

On top of that, the executive board of the principals association called for Olchefskes removal and held a vote of its membership, the results of which were to be announced April 18. Meanwhile, ardent anti-Olchefske sentiments were being heard from an array of alienated parent constituencies, including those with children in programs for the gifted, in alternative schools, and in South End schools a coalition of discontent that united some of the most privileged in the district with some of the least. Things had gotten so bad that parents like Melissa Westbrook were saying they were going to actively work against a school levy next February.

You start looking around and you say, Dont these folks make up the district? acknowledges Urban League president James Kelly. He had supported the superintendent but admitted that more and more it had felt like he was singing solo.

With the superintendent out of the picture eventually, the district should be able to concentrate on a sweeping set of reforms that have given Seattle schools a cutting-edge reputation nationally, and which, arguably, have been underplayed in the press. That, at least, is the hope of district leaders like outgoing school board member Barbara Schaad-Lamphere. But as Seattle Education Association vice president Wendy Kimball hinted in a press conference reacting to this weeks news, those reforms fueled the movement to oust the superintendent. Kimball blames the districts financial problems in part on too quick a move toward greater autonomy at the school level, which had principals and teachers writing their own budgets without adequate controls or training. The district didnt have an infrastructure in place to allow the money to be monitored, she says.

And thats just one of many controversies reform has stirred.

If we hadnt had the problem last November, I dont think wed be where we are today, says Peter Davis, a parent who serves on a number of school committees. In November, the district disclosed that it had mishandled not just this years budget but the previous one, for reasons that were to be disclosed on April 16, when the auditing firm hired by the district delivered its much-anticipated report.

Only now is the full impact of the budget gap being felt. The schools have just finished drawing up their budgets for next year, and they had to lay off teachers for the first time in decades. Technically, next years cuts primarily are the result of the anticipated reduction in state funding, not the previous years mismanagement. But to compensate for the bungling, the district used up \$21 million in reserve that otherwise would have been available as a buffer against state cutbacks.

High schools have been hit hardest. The reasons are complicated, but they have to do with the districts decision to fund the schools according to average enrollment over the school year, rather than enrollment at the beginning of the year. The result is less money, because enrollment drops as the year goes on due to transfers, dropouts, and early departures for community colleges.

Certainly theres a logic to the new formula, though principals argue that they have to plan a suitable number of classes for their maximum enrollment, no matter how many kids leave. Otherwise, where will all the kids sit at the beginning of the year? The change also means high schools have hundreds of thousands fewer dollars to spend. Retiring Cleveland High principal Ted Howard, whos on the executive board of the principals association that called for Olchefskes dismissal, says his school lost \$200,000. He says others have lost as much as \$370,000. Among the cuts Howard made was the elimination of a prize-winning marketing program that brought its largely minority students to competitions that otherwise would tend to be composed entirely of whites. Laying off the teacher running that program, Howard says, was the hardest thing Ive done in my life.

Olchefske had promised that the financial bungling would not lead to cuts that could be felt in the classroom. Hence the growing outcry. Nevertheless, as the superintendents critics kept saying, the controversy has been about more than money.

Youve got to remember that theres a lot of change going on in the district, says Don Nielsen, a former board member who remains influential. Just since the early 1990s, he says, the district has floated \$2 billion worth of levies to rebuild some 20 schools, eliminated integration-based busing,

adopted more academic standards than those set by the state, changed the way it funds schools by having money follow students instead of employees, and decentralized the system by having schools participate in writing their own budgets and deciding who to hire.

These are monumental changes, Nielsen says. You cannot name an urban system that has done more to fix itself than Seattle. Olchefske, who served for three years as the chief financial officer under former Superintendent John Stanford before replacing him at the time of Stanfords death in 1998, was the architect of many of these changes and implemented almost all of them.

The old standby to explain and dismiss criticism people dont like change had become the mantra of Olchefskes defenders. Patronizing as it might be, it is true that you can trace some of the furor among district constituents back to one or more of these reforms. Some parents affiliated with alternative schools, for instance, are upset over the superintendents insistence on report cards, which parents feel undermine alternative learning. Olchefske, however, sees report cards as part and parcel of the move toward standards.

Olchefske, too, puts an egalitarian spin on standards that appears to leave him ambivalent about programs for the gifted. Seemingly more concerned about bringing all children up to standard than attending to those working at a higher level, the district has put a lot of effort into devising ways to broaden parents would say dilute the Spectrum and APP programs. A backlash ensued.

Another case is the discontent of teachers. Obviously, layoffs are a prime reason. Yet, as union leader Kimball relates, there are other issues. Not only do teachers feel that they havent been adequately trained for their budget responsibilities, they also feel burdened by the extra work. While union leaders concede they fought for such autonomy, they argue that the district hasnt factored in the time teachers need to do this work.

At the same time, teachers are being asked to participate in a process known as transformation, whereby schools write and implement a plan to bring all kids up to standard. Teachers are supposed to write new curricula, mapping an entire year more work, on top of which comes a pile of other initiatives,

from a literacy project to new math, that also require additional training. Things keep getting dumped on them without their being tried out or field-tested, says union head Dunn.

It didnt help that Olchefske pushed through these reforms without, as one parent puts it, the grace and charisma of his predecessor, Stanford. A former investment banker, Olchefske comes across as bright, eager, and good intentionedbut also as heavy-handed and dismissive. That probably explains in part why Olchefske alienated even some constituents he seemed to be most concerned aboutminority students and their parents, for instance.

All this dissatisfaction points to questions beyond those of stylequestions that will remain after Olchefske has left and which might now be put to school board members, three of whom are up for re-election in November. Are the changes the district has made the right ones? Is the pace of change making unrealistic demands on teachers? Are schools given the support they need to accomplish these changes?

One encouraging case regarding the reforms is Thurgood Marshall Elementary, a school composed mostly of minorities. Principal Ben Wright says hes seized the new autonomy afforded schools to go where we need to go. He has made dramatic changes, including adopting single-sex classrooms and extending both the school day and the school year. And the schools jump in test scores has been equally dramatic. Last year, WASL scores were higher by 35 percentage points.

Olchefske makes no apologies for the pace of change. He points out that the graduating class of 2008 will have to pass all sections of the 10th-grade state WASL test in order to graduate. They will take that test for the first time in just three years. Last year, only a third of the districts students met the standard. In other words, there is no time to waste. Whoever succeeds Olchefske is going to have a lot to do.

nshapiro@seattleweekly.com

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