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Lancaster school superintendent to resign

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Lancaster schools Superintendent Larry Lewis will work for the district through July and then resign, according to a settlement agreement approved unanimously by school trustees Monday.

Under the terms, Lewis will serve as special assistant to the interim superintendent, and retain his current salary of \$197,600 and benefits. He will voluntarily resign July 31.

The settlement comes almost four months after the board placed Lewis on paid leave following months of financial woes in the district. Trustees also hired an attorney to investigate allegations raised by board President Carolyn Morris, including that Lewis withheld information from the board.

"I know this will be the best thing for our district," Morris said in an interview. "We need to move forward, get back to academics and bring our district back to a healthy level."

The board passed the agreement without discussion after a 90-minute closed session.

Lewis said he feels good about the settlement. He said he would serve in an advisory role for the district but would not be there on a daily basis.

"I'm going to take some time and see what the future holds," Lewis said, adding that he plans to look for another superintendent's position.

In December, Lewis requested a public hearing following the board's decision to terminate his contract. The hearing was scheduled to begin next week.

In a five-page statement, Lewis acknowledged a breakdown in his relationship with the current school board. He said it had become difficult for the two sides to find common ground.

Lewis lost his majority support on the seven-member school board after elections in May.

Trustees hired Dana S. Marable as interim superintendent in December. Marable is the former Longview ISD superintendent and interim superintendent for Temple schools.

The attorney's inquiry into Lewis found that in addition to withholding a preliminary state audit report

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REX C. CURRY/Special Contributor
Larry Lewis stood behind his attorney, Rick Hill, at a Lancaster school board meeting Monday, at which a settlement of his case was approved. Lewis denies wrongdoing.

from board members, he made illegal zero-interest loans and advances of district money to employees.

The investigation also found that Lewis paid cash awards to employees without authority and proper funding and failed to inform the board about 18 employees hired at middle and high schools but not included in the budget. In his statement, Lewis addressed each of the allegations and denied any wrongdoing. He said he was unaware of any loan program to employees, and also said the board knew about the awards program and the company that promised funding for it.

He blamed the unbudgeted staff positions on record-keeping mistakes by the human resources and payroll departments.

TIMELINE: LANCASTER SUPERINTENDENT

April 2003: Larry Lewis named Lancaster ISD superintendent.

May 2003: Lancaster officials uncover millions of dollars in accounting errors and overspending. Trustees approve a \$3 million loan to meet payroll needs through the end of the fiscal year.

July 1, 2003: Lewis officially begins work in Lancaster; his starting salary is \$117,000.

February 2004: Lancaster voters approve a \$110 million school bond package.

May 2004: Board members give Lewis high marks on his first evaluation.

October 2004: Trustees extend Lewis' contract through 2009 and give him a 62.4 percent raise to \$190,000.

May 2006: Voters reject a \$93.6 million school bond package.

November 2006: Voters reject a \$215 million school bond package.

January 2007: Lancaster misses a state deadline to file an audit for the 2005-06 school year.

May 2007: Audit is sent to state three months late. Voters reject \$142 million school bond package. District takes out a \$6 million short-term loan.

July 2007: Lewis announces plan to reduce school week to four days to save money, setting off heated debate in the community; the plan is later dropped.

September 2007: Texas Education Agency announces plans to send audit team to investigate Lancaster's finances.

March 2008: Trustees extend Lewis' contract through June 2011 and raise his salary to \$197,800.

May 2008: Lewis loses his majority support on the board after elections.

June 2008: State releases audit report, which cites numerous financial problems.

July 2008: State sends conservator to Lancaster to oversee the district's finances. Trustees hire attorney

to investigate Lewis for tampering with mail, withholding information and insubordination.

August 2008: Trustees approve a \$40.5 million budget, including raises for all staff.

October 2008: Budget falls short \$1.5 million due to low enrollment. Lewis asks staff to choose either salary cuts or layoffs. Trustees vote 4-3 to place Lewis on paid leave.

November 2008: Attorney's investigation alleges numerous wrongdoings by Lewis, including withholding information from trustees and illegal use of district money. Trustees vote 5-2 to begin terminating Lewis' contract.

December 2008: Lewis requests a public hearing to address allegations against him. Trustees hire Dana S. Marable as interim superintendent.

January 2009: Lewis' hearing is set for Feb. 9.

Monday: Trustees unanimously approve a settlement agreement with Lewis. He will work for the district until July and then resign.