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'Beginning of the Alonso era'

Just weeks into the job, the city schools' CEO is changing how business is done with a distinguishing hands-on style

BY SARA NEUFELD
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In his first two weeks on the job, Andres Alonso has established a hands-on leadership style that distinguishes him from previous chief executive officers of the Baltimore school system.

From now on, no principal is appointed without a personal meeting with him. No long-term suspension or expulsion receives his approval until he is briefed on the situation. No contract is sent to the school board without his review.

Alonso, the former deputy chancellor in New York City, has pledged to visit each of Baltimore's 180 schools in the next year. He replies to all of his e-mail himself, rather than passing the task off to an assistant.

"There's no doubt in my mind who's in charge," said school board member Robert Heck, praising the new schools chief's "remarkable" attention to detail.

While deciding whether to leave New York for Baltimore, he was more concerned about the autonomy he would be granted than the money he would receive, Alonso said in a recent interview.

In most school systems around the country, the board of education appoints the CEO or superintendent, and that person is supposed to run the day-to-day operation without interference from board members.

But theory and reality don't always match, and Alonso -- who has a Harvard law degree -- insisted on a clause in his contract spelling out his authority.

The contract states that individual board members agree not to direct Alonso or anyone on his staff "regarding the management of [the school system] or the solution of specific

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Andres Alonso (Sun photo by Algeria Perna) Jul 11, 2007

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problems." They agree to refer all complaints to him.

Alonso is being paid a base salary of \$230,000. That's slightly more than interim CEO Charlene Cooper Boston and CEO Bonnie S. Copeland earned before him but less than superintendents in Montgomery, Prince George's and Baltimore counties.

"Financial terms were never an issue," he said. "I needed to be convinced that I would be able to be effective. In order to be effective, I needed trust from the board."

Board members made no secret that they hired Alonso to shake things up. Otherwise, they could have hired Boston, a longtime city schools administrator who applied for the permanent position.

Alonso's hands-on style was evident Tuesday night at his first school board meeting as he took notes on a laptop about the concerns expressed during public comment.

Opening remarks by board Chairman Brian D. Morris were briefer than usual. "It's the beginning of the Alonso era," Morris said, "and we're very, very excited about it."

Alonso begged to differ.

"It is the Baltimore era," he said.

But the new CEO is clearly changing how business is done.

During summer meetings, the board usually enters into dozens of contracts and appoints dozens of employees for the coming academic year. At Tuesday's meeting, it was scheduled to vote on 38 procurement items.

Alonso had 27 of the contracts pulled from the agenda because he had not had time to adequately review them. He said he wants to understand the reason for each contract and how it relates to the system's overall mission of educating children.

"I don't ever sign anything unless I understand the purpose," he said. "I want to know things are happening for a reason and the priorities are there."

While the board usually appoints several new principals each July, only two were appointed Tuesday. Alonso said he met with one of them, and the other had completed the selection process before he started as CEO. He said he will interview all future candidates.

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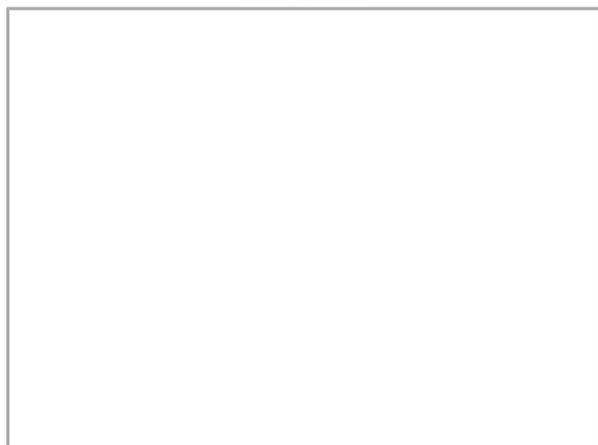
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