

## MIAMI-DADE SCHOOLS

## School payouts could be up for review

• The Miami-Dade School Board may order a review of how the district handles unused vacation and sick time.

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When Broward County Schools Superintendent Jim Notter left his job this year, he received a big payday — including \$241,000 worth of sick days and vacation time that he never used.

What would be the tab for Miami-Dade County Public Schools if administrators and other employees left and cashed out their unused vacation and sick time?

A measure before the School Board could tally up the cost, and perhaps prompt changes.

School Board member Marta Pérez has proposed a review of severance pay for all district employees. The board will consider the idea on Wednesday.

The proposal adds to growing debate over golden parachutes for public-sector officials. Several high-profile payouts for outgoing employees have sparked outrage from taxpayers. Yet the practice has continued in some governments in South Florida during a tough economy and lean budgets.

"It would be good public policy to make sure whatever we have is in the best interest in getting efficiencies in our government and making sure the priority is on the students," Pérez said.

Superintendent Alberto Carvalho said generous payouts are not a problem at the school district. But how fast employees earn vacation time could be "aggressive," he said last week. "I'm going to look at it," he said. "I don't think it's a matter of the payout at the end. I think it's a matter of the rate at which you accrue it."

Only three employees — the superintendent, school board attorney and chief auditor — have direct contracts with the School Board. "We don't have golden parachutes for anybody," he said.

In the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, unused vacation is capped at 60 days while sick time can accumulate over a career.

Pérez said research by her office indicates that unused leave owed to 30 top-salaried employees would cost the district more than \$2.5 million, if they left at the end of July. Of that total, nine would collect about \$1.2 million, she said.

School Board members Chairwoman Perla Tabares Hantman and Carlos Curbelo said there is a difference between leave pay for administrators and others who don't earn as much, like teachers.

Said Tabares Hantman: "Terminal pay for employees represents days that were earned but not taken. . . Some of our employees have had very long, dedicated careers."

Curbelo said administrators and district leaders "should be held to a higher standard. Their practices with separation packages and the like should be more consistent with what is happening in the private sector."

Any review should be comprehensive, said School Board member Raquel Regalado. "I'm going to support the item; I think it's good to have the information. When we get those numbers, we'll see what's high and what's not."

However, the value of having principals and teachers in school — not out sick or on vacation — should be weighed, too, said School Board Vice Chairman Larry Feldman, a former principal.

"I really believe I'd rather have my teachers and administrators at school," he said. "If it means they're going to bank the days, so be it. Otherwise, I don't know how I could be responsible to parents that their children are receiving the highest level of instruction."