


# MSCS standardized teacher salaries. Former Superintendent Joris Ray got a raise

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## EDUCATION

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MEMPHIS — Former Memphis-Shelby County Schools Superintendent Joris Ray received a pay raise in 2021 when the district did not distribute an equal raise to all employees. The pay raise was included in the salary used to calculate his recent termination pay.



Ray's contract allowed for him to receive the same percent raises granted to teachers each year. But teachers did not receive a standard percent raise in 2021.

Instead, the district used a different method to calculate Ray's pay increase as opposed to how some teachers were granted raises.



Teachers saw their salaries standardized across a new salary schedule. Using those salary adjustments, the district calculated an average raise percentage and applied it to Ray's salary, which was \$310,124 when he was placed on paid leave in July.



Some MSCS board members told The Commercial Appeal the knowledge of the raise has prompted them to become more critical of policies and procedures as the board searches for a new superintendent, with one calling for an overhaul to policy that would require superintendent pay increases to be presented to the board. It is unclear whether board members were made aware of the raise.

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The salary schedule is a document assigning teacher salaries based upon rows for years of teaching experience and columns of educational attainment of bachelor's, master's or doctoral degrees. Memphis teacher unions have long sought a salary schedule for predictable pay and reliable raises.

When the schedule was implemented in August 2021, teachers were slotted to the amount that most closely aligned to their years of experience and educational attainment without decreasing their pay.

Ray received a 4.6% raise at the time, which the district explained as a calculation of the average percent raise teachers received from bumps in the salary schedule that standardized teacher pay. That's equivalent to a pay bump of \$13,600, which lifted Ray's salary from

\$296,486 to \$310,124.

It is unclear who made the request for this raise calculation, how the average was calculated or whether school board members knew at the time. MSCS did not respond to these questions from The Commercial Appeal, and most board members did not specifically answer the question of their own knowledge of the raise.

The former superintendent's exit package was calculated from his final salary, which was \$310,124 when he was placed on paid leave in mid-July, records show. The salary was used to set the new salary for the interim superintendent.

Ray did not respond to request for comment from The Commercial Appeal.

## **Some board members say superintendent policy, procedures should be revamped**

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The Commercial Appeal surveyed the 12 board members who were on the board from August 2021 at the time of the raise, through the external investigation and payout, until now, at which point the board has hired chief financial officer Toni Williams as interim superintendent at a \$310,000 salary.

The Commercial Appeal asked board members if they were aware of the raise from the salary schedule average and whether they supported it, as well as how or if the raise should impact the exit pay or new salaries.

While some were critical, most affirmed the district's explanation of the raise, with some adding that Ray's pay with the raise was in line with salaries of other superintendents helming large school districts.

Newly elected board chair Althea Greene said the raises were "in accordance with (Ray's) contract and alignment with the percentage salary increases given to teachers." She said his salary was in line with superintendents of comparably-sized districts and said she would not be surprised if the search firm suggests a higher salary for a permanent superintendent.



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Acknowledging the district's explanation that the salary schedule constituted a pay raise, board member Kevin Woods said "the board may want to modify this contract language moving forward."

"On the issue raised of transparency," Woods continued, "I would hope that anytime the board provides a pay increase to the Superintendent, it would be done in public. I plan to work with our new Chair and Vice Chair to recommend a policy change requiring the board to publicly ratify all pay increases of its one employee."

Board member Amber Huett-Garcia, who joined the board this month, said the knowledge of the raise "underscores the need for a rigorous superintendent evaluation," adding that an assessment of the evaluation rubric should be as high a priority as its search for a superintendent.





Michelle McKissack said the board is reviewing its policies and contract language for a future superintendent.

"The community will be involved in this process," she said. "The new contract and pay scale for the new permanent superintendent will be evaluated and publicly debated by the board."

As for Toni Williams receiving the same pay, McKissack said, "It's nice for a woman to finally receive equal pay for the same job."

Current or former board members Stephanie Love, Charles Everett, Miska Clay Bibbs and Joyce Dorse Coleman also responded, none taking issue with the district's explanation for the raise. Keith Williams questioned the validity of the raise information.

Current board member Sheleah Harris did not respond, nor did former board members Shante Avant, last a board member in February, and Billy Orgel, last a board member in August.

## Raise left Ray's salary in top quartile of US superintendent pay

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Ray became the interim superintendent in December 2018 and was paid \$285,000. He received a 3% raise, as did teachers, in his first permanent year on the job, bumping his pay to \$293,550.

When board members extended his contract in December 2020, it included the same language about raises: If Ray received a satisfactory evaluation, he'd receive the salary raise percentage "that which is received by certificated employees." If employees didn't get a raise but Ray had a good evaluation, the board could provide him a bonus.

Ray received the 1% salary raise employees received for the 2020-2021 school year.

Since the 2020-2021 school year, teachers have received bonuses, but no raises. Some teachers saw immediate raises when the district standardized teacher pay with the salary schedule. No teacher pay was reduced with the scale. The 4.6% salary bump brought Ray to \$310,124.

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The raise didn't place Ray out of line for salaries of other superintendents in large school districts, but it did widen the gap between Ray and the next highest earners in the district, the two deputy superintendents, who each earn \$199,653.

The median salary for superintendents of districts with more than 100,000 students, like MSCS, is \$228,941, according to a 2021-2022 report by the School Superintendents Association. Without the 4.6% raise, Ray was already earning in the top quartile of superintendent salaries, which the study places between \$265,446 and a maximum of \$334,000.

The board voted to terminate Ray on Aug. 23, the same day the body was originally scheduled to publicize the results of his 2021-2022 school year evaluation, from which he could have received a bonus.

The exit plan, recognized by the school board as a resignation, provided Ray 18 months of severance pay, or approximately \$480,000, according to the school district. The board ended the external investigation into allegations Ray abused power or violated policy.

The Commercial Appeal has outstanding records requests for Ray's pay stubs as well as documentation of his salary increases. Requests for employee files returned a set of documents with no information from his tenure as superintendent. The most recent date on the files was an email chain in February 2019 to confirm his interim superintendent contract, which allotted him a salary of \$285,000.

MSCS used the \$310,123.83 salary to inform the salary of its newly selected interim superintendent, Toni Williams, newly elected board chair Greene told board members Tuesday. She explained Williams' salary of \$310,000 "is the same salary that our former superintendent had."

Greene on Tuesday brought forth a resolution for the board to accept a contract for Williams, who the board selected as interim superintendent upon Greene's recommendation last month.

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