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Superintendent of Sunnyside will retire in '07

By Jeff Commings

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The Sunnyside Unified School District governing board voted Tuesday to accept the retirement of Superintendent Raúl Bejarano in 2007, but the leader of the South Side district had little time to reflect on what many consider a successful run.

Wednesday was spent mostly on a panel of the Metropolitan Education Commission, which meant Bejarano's normal duties as superintendent — visiting classrooms, encouraging staff, handling correspondence — would have to wait another day.

"I told my wife, 'I am pooped,' " Bejarano said Wednesday evening. "It always takes a little bit out of you, but that's the job."

The unanimous vote came quickly and quietly during a blanket approval of a number of items, including hirings, leaves of absence and retirements of about 60 employees.

Also approved for retirement Tuesday was Assistant Superintendent John Cox, who has overseen the district's educational services since 1993. He will retire July 1.

Though Bejarano's retirement won't take place until the end of the 2006-07 school year, those who have worked with him already are emotional about the news.

"When things are operating well, you don't think about losing quality people," said Sunnyside High government teacher Rich Mayorga, a 23-year district veteran who heard the news Wednesday afternoon. "So things were going pretty well, and it's hard to think about him not being here."

Among his fellow superintendents, Bejarano's success in running the district at a steady pace has made him unique.

"What Dr. Bejarano has brought to Sunnyside is a period of very healthy stability," said Vail Superintendent Calvin Baker. "Far more important than starting a new program is having a steady hand on the rudder."

Sunnyside's numbers reflect that stabilization. In six years, the graduation rate has remained between 55 and 61 percent. The district attendance rate has hovered between 93 and 94 percent since 2000.

Unlike the recent departures of superintendents in some other districts, Bejarano's retirement is not awash in controversy or hindered by negotiation. It's simply the right time for the 60-year-old Southern Arizona native, he said.

"I think I've met some of the goals that I wanted to meet in educating minority children," he said. "I don't think there's enough we can do, but I think it's time for me to spend time with my family and do some things I've failed

Fast facts on Raúl Bejarano

- **Salary:** \$101,769

- **Education:** Nogales High School graduate; bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees from the University of Arizona.

- **Experience:** About 30 years as a Spanish teacher, athletic director, assistant principal, principal and superintendent in the Nogales Unified School District. Superintendent, Sunnyside Unified School District, 2000-present.

- **Family:** Wife, Christine, retiring this year; two daughters who teach in Sunnyside, son who works in the Amphitheater school district; two grandchildren.

to do, which is go out and enjoy myself."

There's plenty more to do in the next 15 months – keep students in school, give them confidence to continue on to a college degree and boost the district-community relationship — but Bejarano already has amassed an impressive legacy.

Most recently, he was named the All-Arizona superintendent for large school districts by the Arizona School Administrators Association, based on nominations from his staff.

He was instrumental in getting Sunnyside involved in the national Learning Communities Coalition, which helps guide high-school seniors to college life.

And teachers and principals have applauded his efforts to ensure that they get sufficient opportunities for staff development through accreditations and study sessions.

But more importantly, Mayorga said, Bejarano is "like the guy next door who also runs a district. You could joke with him and he took the joke pretty well."

Before Bejarano came to Sunnyside, he was a principal at Nogales High School, a job he held for nine years before the board there dismissed him in the middle of plans to restructure the struggling school. Almost immediately, he was promoted to Nogales' superintendent, a post he held until accepting the Sunnyside job in 2000.

The year 2000 also brought the superintendent appointments of Vicki Balentine at Amphitheater and Stan Paz at Tucson Unified. Balentine still holds her job; Paz resigned under pressure in 2004.

Because the board just voted to approve the resignation, the search for Bejarano's replacement has not begun, said spokeswoman Monique Soria.

TUSD Superintendent Roger Pfeuffer said, however, that Bejarano was wise to give the district so much advance notice because "he's given the organization an opportunity to settle into the (search) process. I think it's a good step for a leader."

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