



City hires new school chief

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Staff writers

Alida Begina, Syracuse's new school superintendent, says her father would have been proud to see her become the first woman to head the Syracuse school district.

Begina's dad passed away last year. "Begina" When she was growing up in Minneapolis, he made it clear that she, her sister and her brother would go to college, even when she told him her career plan to be a hairdresser.

Begina, now 55, listened to her dad.

She went to college and grew up to be an educator. For the last 10 years she's been the superintendent of the Hamden, Conn., school district.

Friday, the Syracuse school board hired her to lead the district, which has roughly three times the students and more than four times the employees as Hamden. Begina (pronounced buh-GEEN-a) starts her new job Oct. 17.

"This is a big challenge. That's what excited me about it," Begina said several hours after the school board voted to hire her. "I've never shied away from risk-taking or challenges. I was not a superintendent before I came to Hamden. The board took a chance on me."

She said the Syracuse job attracted her because she sees the potential to make a difference in the lives of children.

The board and Begina agreed on a three-year contract with an annual salary of \$175,000 the first year, with future raises and merit incentive bonuses to be determined by the board each year. Her current annual salary is between \$130,000 and \$140,000. Begina's new contract requires her to live in Syracuse. Her husband, Bill Begina, was with her at the school board meeting and later at Syracuse City Hall, where Begina met briefly with Mayor Matt Driscoll. Bill Begina runs a consulting business. The couple have two grown daughters.

School board President Cynthia Kirby said the board selected Begina after a national search in part because of her experience in an urban district and her focus on closing the achievement gap between groups of students.

Begina oversaw a \$150 million multischool renovation project in that job, and the Syracuse district is beginning a 10-year, \$600 million renovation of all its schools.

The board said Begina formed partnerships with a network of colleges and universities; started an educational foundation that raised \$300,000 to support the schools; serves on the governing

board of the Minority Student Achievement Network; and works with the National Urban Alliance, which aims to bring the best educational practices into urban classrooms.

Begina did not get a unanimous vote from the board. Commissioner Calvin Corriders was not at the special board meeting because of work commitments, Kirby said.

In a surprise move, Commissioner Marisol Hernandez abstained from voting. The other five board members voted to hire Begina.

Hernandez said after the vote she abstained for a couple of reasons: She did not have enough information about Begina. She said she had a conflict and could not make the two interviews the board scheduled with Begina. She said she also was concerned about the level of public input the board allowed in the selection process.

The board kept all candidates' names secret during the search process, including Begina's, which drew criticism from some. Last time the board hired a superintendent, it introduced the two final candidates to the public.

Walter Dixie, leader of the Alliance Network, said Friday that's what the board should have done this time. The network is an advocacy group for Latinos and blacks. The community had no opportunity to question Begina ahead of time about her track-record with diversity and other issues, Dixie said.

"I think when you do it this way you do a disservice to any candidate because we don't have ownership for the African American Latino community," Dixie said.

Begina said she intends to reach out to the community to address its concerns.

She said the decision to leave Hamden was difficult, especially since one of her daughters is a teacher there.

When the head-hunting firm approached her about the Syracuse job she had no plans to move on. But when she learned about the district, saw the city and met the board, she was hooked, she said. She considers Syracuse to be a vibrant city.

"I saw the amount of construction that's going on, the revitalization of downtown. I saw the Mission Landing townhouses," she said. "I did some research on the new chancellor of Syracuse (University) and how much she wants to work with the school system."

Although Hamden is a fraction of the size of Syracuse, it has the challenges of an urban district, including student poverty, Begina said. It is also a racially diverse district, she said.

Hamden is a bedroom community of New Haven, Conn., the home of Yale University. It has a population of about 56,913 people, of which about 23 percent are members of minority groups, according to the 2000 census. About 4.5 percent of all families in Hamden earn less than the federal poverty level.

Syracuse, meanwhile, had 147,306 people in 2000, according to the Census. About 36 percent of Syracuse's population is minority, and about 22 percent of its families are below the federal poverty level, census figures show. That makes Syracuse much close to Hamden's neighboring city, New Haven, which had a population of 123,626 in 2000, according to the census.

About 57 percent of New Haven's population is minority, and about 20 percent of its families are below the poverty level.

Mary Marrandino, the Hamden School District's assistant superintendent, described Begina as a woman with a sharp intellect, who carries numbers, statistics and facts in her head that most people need notes to keep straight.

"She has an incredible memory," Marrandino said. "I think you'll find she's somebody who is very innovative, very community-oriented and very bright."

Marrandino said Begina actively worked to increase parental involvement in schools, at one time hired outreach workers to talk with parents in neighborhoods where parental involvement was low.

The district's toughest challenge has been test scores, Marrandino said, specifically, trying to meet state standards. Test scores in language arts have risen in recent years, but math scores have proved to be a bigger challenge, Marrandino said.

Driscoll, who met Begina for the first time Friday, said he's confident the school board had made a good decision.

"I could tell right off the bat that I liked her, and I think this bodes well for the district," Driscoll said. "She's very impressive. She's done her homework, and she said she's glad to see that the city supports the school district."

Driscoll said they briefly talked about topics ranging from the \$600 million school renovation project to her desire to visit city schools with him.

He said he did bring up his top three education priorities: merging the city's and school district's financial management systems, improving the district's dropout rate and increasing security in city schools.

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