

Marty Pollio can make about the same money retired as running JCPS. So why would he stay?



Krista Johnson

Louisville Courier Journal

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He's been Jefferson County Public Schools superintendent for four years and worked as an educator within the district for nearly three decades.

Now JCPS Superintendent Marty Pollio, who has steered the district through significant changes amid persistent scrutiny, could retire and make roughly the same amount of money as his current annual base salary of \$276,000.

And while Pollio says he doesn't plan to retire next year, the fact that he could make as much either way is a concern to at least one member of the JCPS school board.

Chris Kolb, who represents District 2, said he hopes a salary increase will be discussed Tuesday night when the seven-member board discusses Pollio's performance in executive session.

Pollio's position is already the highest paid in the district, the state's largest with approximately 96,000 students and 17,000 employees. And in the past Pollio has turned down bonuses and a pay hike, Kolb said, but "I've been trying to get him to accept a pretty significant increase."

Pollio told The Courier Journal in an interview that he has thought about a raise, saying "I think that is something that I will discuss with our board."

But, he continued, "for me, it clearly is a challenge when you work in a public school system and you want to provide all of the employees with the benefits and compensation that they deserve as well."

How much could Marty Pollio earn in retirement?

In arguing Pollio should get a raise, Kolb pointed to the fact that the district's chief academic officer position — among the system's top positions — went unfilled about eight months.

"I heard one of the factors that he had a hard time getting people to apply for the (position) was because people thought he wouldn't be around much longer because why would he work for free," Kolb said.

"It could help people realize you intend to stay if your salary goes up," he said he told Pollio.

Pollio has been paying into the state's Teachers' Retirement System since his JCPS career began 29 years ago. There are many factors that would dictate the exact dollar figure he could draw from his pension annually, such as the benefits he might have opted into or how many saved sick days he can cash in.

But Pollio's annual draw can initially be formulated by calculating the average of the five years of his highest salary, according to the system's handbook. Hired as superintendent in 2018, Pollio has been paid \$276,000 each year since and next year will mark his fifth year at that rate.

That annual rate of pay for a superintendent of a large urban district is not unusual.

The superintendents within the Council of the Great City Schools, which is comprised of 78 large urban school districts across the country, had an average salary of \$276,781 as of November 2022, according to data from the organization.

Within Kentucky, Fayette County Superintendent Demetrus Liggins, who serves a district with about 40,000 students, earns slightly less than Pollio at \$275,000. But when monthly vehicle stipends are factored in — Pollio gets \$750 a month for that — Liggins actually earns about \$2,000 more.

Meanwhile, when looking at the length of service for superintendents, Pollio's time in the position is slightly unusual. Of the 78 in the council, only 10 superintendents have a longer tenure than Pollio's.

A 2018 report cited the average tenure of a superintendent of a large district as five to six years, but there has been a noticeable uptick in superintendents leaving their roles the past few years, with some citing burnout from navigating COVID-19 or increased public discord facing schools.

Within Kentucky, the average length of service for Kentucky superintendents was just over four years at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year, according to an article published by the Kentucky School Boards Association.

That article also said research shows "whole-district student achievement" is influenced by continuity in leadership. "The need to retain effective superintendents is apparent, especially in historically low achieving districts," it says. "Stability in the position also has a positive effect on employee morale, community support and the efficiency of daily district operations."

So why would Pollio stay at JCPS?

When asked why he would continue working given his pay situation, Pollio chuckled and said, "I don't know, I have no idea."

He did, however, point to the goals his team identified through its "Future State" strategic plan, and how those were put on hold for years.

Prior to the pandemic, district leaders went to the drawing board to reimagine the school system with the question in mind: "What is stopping JCPS from getting the outcomes we need for kids?" Pollio said earlier this year.

What they came up with was six areas to focus on, guided by the principles of increasing racial equity, increasing engagement and improving climate and culture.

The focus areas included:

- Technology
- Extended learning
- Student assignment
- Facilities
- Workforce and leadership development
- Resourcing high poverty schools

Now, many of those plans have been put into motion. Changes coming this fall include a new student assignment plan, new funding formula, new start times and a new reading curriculum.

"I feel a responsibility to ensure that they are successful as we implement (those) over the next year or two," Pollio said about why he doesn't plan to retire next year.

Pollio also pointed to the research showing student outcomes improve when district leadership prevails.

"There continues to be a significant amount of turnover in superintendents across America, especially in large districts, and I think that is extremely negative for student outcomes," he said.

"I think the districts we've seen be successful have had continuity of leadership in order to get those outcomes. That's what I want and hope to see here — that we reap the benefits for students in all of the changes that we have made. It's the No. 1 thing I continue to focus on."