



## **Baltimore schools CEO could leave amid contract dispute. Insiders are worried.**

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Negotiations between Baltimore’s school board and its long-serving CEO, Sonja Santelises, appear to have stalled less than two months before her contract expires — a highly unusual situation that could suddenly leave the school system without a leader if they can’t reach a deal.

Parents and community members say the board has left them in the dark.

Three sources with knowledge of the negotiations said the board does not want to give Santelises a four-year contract, the standard for superintendents in the city and around the state. Santelises has asked for a contract that would keep her in the job for another 2.5 years, those sources said. They did not want to be identified because of the sensitivity of the negotiations.

Two other sources, who are close to the board, said many board members aren’t being told the details of the negotiations. The chair and vice chair have said the discussion with Santelises centers around a one-year contract, according to the sources. Board leadership has not informed the rest of the board that 30 months is even part of the discussion, those sources said.

Sources said salary does not appear to be an issue in the negotiations. She was the highest paid superintendent in Maryland in 2020 when the board approved her current four-year contract and a \$325,000 salary that allowed for a 2.5% annual pay increase. Superintendents usually receive pay increases when they get a new contract.

Board chair Ronald McFadden declined to respond by Tuesday evening to questions sent to him on Friday. Board members did not respond to a request for comment on Tuesday.

“The main question is why haven’t we received an update on whichever way it is going,” said Angie Winder, chair of the city schools Parent and Community Advisory

Board. “It would be nice to receive some information. Families deserve to know what direction it is being taken. ... We would love to have some transparency.”

It is unclear why the board does not want to give Santelises a four year contract.

The subject of who will be CEO has become a hot topic of parent conversation, Winder said. Not all parents want to see Santelises continue.

Marnell Cooper, who was chair of the school board that hired Santelises in 2016, said the board’s lack of an agreement so close to the end of the contract is concerning. “The fact that the board has not yet reached a resolution on her contract is a little unnerving,” he said. “I don’t understand what the board is trying to do by not extending a four-year contract and wanting something less.”

If Santelises stays on the job, she will be one of the longest-serving urban superintendents in the country. Of the 78 districts represented by the Council of the Great City Schools, an organization representing large urban districts, Santelises is the second-longest-serving superintendent in the same district. Only the Toledo superintendent has been in the job longer.

Santelises also is among a small group of superintendents in Maryland who would be beginning a third term, including those in Harford and St. Mary’s counties, according to the association representing the state’s superintendents.

Santelises has repeatedly said she is not interested in becoming a superintendent in another school district.

Her long tenure is what makes Santelises so valuable to the city, said Cooper. He said he asked Santelises to please stay for a decade after he read research showing that the most successful superintendents were those with longer tenures. It is difficult, Cooper said, for any leader to make significant change in a large, urban school system in just a few years. He said academic achievement has improved under Santelises and she has brought stability after years of turmoil.

”Superintendent searches are hard, and they are time-consuming,” said Cooper, who maintains it is not in the best interest of the district to change superintendents. No current board member, he said, has experience with a search for a new leader.

At the time Santelises was hired, the board and community had become dissatisfied with CEO Gregory Thornton, who had been chosen after an extensive national search and was on the job less than two years. The board decision to hire Santelises

was a surprise, done without telling the public they were searching for a replacement for Thornton.

Under Maryland law, the length of a superintendent's contract is required to be four years, except in Baltimore, where the length of the contract and any renewals can be up to four years. On June 30, Santelises will have served two four-year contracts.

Unlike other Maryland school systems, the city also does not have to adhere to deadlines for hiring a superintendent. County superintendents must notify their school boards by Feb. 1 if they would like a new contract. And if a county board decides to reappoint its current superintendent, Maryland law says that the board must take action no later than March 1.

In practice, most school boards and superintendents make a decision on whether a contract will be renewed in the fall, about nine months before the end of the contract. If the superintendent isn't staying in the job, the board usually starts a search by January and hires a new leader by the spring.

The city school board's failure to take action by May is unusual.

Santelises' contract required her to inform the board whether she wanted another contract by March 30, but her decision was not made public.

Santelises did not respond for a request to discuss the negotiations.

If there is no agreement by June 30, a spokesman for the school system said, Santelises and the board could come to understanding to keep her in place until there is some resolution on her contract or she leaves.

For decades, the city school system had a string of superintendents who came and went, each instituting a new set of priorities. Test scores remained largely flat. Only one superintendent, Andres Alonso, stayed for six years. He instituted several sweeping changes that affected how teachers are paid and the formula for how schools are funded. Legislation was also passed during his tenure that provided a 10-year, \$1 billion plan to rebuild and refurbish schools.

When Santelises arrived, she left in place most of what Alonso had started, but focused on the nitty-gritty of teaching and learning in classrooms. She immediately ditched the old curriculum and adopted one proven to raise achievement in other districts. She also began recruiting talent for the central office to stabilize the system.

Under Santelises, the school system has seen test scores increase in English Language Arts in grades 3 through 8 every time the test has been given since 2016, including during the pandemic. Math scores fell during the pandemic and have yet to recover, as is true in other school systems in the state.

She also led the system during a number of crises. In her second year, the heating systems failed at 60 schools, leaving some students in 40-degree classrooms before schools were shut down. The failure focused national attention on the dilapidated buildings. Since then, the buildings have been improved and there is now an early warning system that tells building managers when the boilers are failing.

A grading scandal erupted at Augusta Fells Savage Institute for the Visual Arts in 2019. An investigation found that school leaders had schemed to inflate enrollment, pressured teachers to change grades and scheduled students into classes that didn't exist.

The school has since been cleaned up and operates under a new principal. An audit done by an outside firm found this winter that no further grade-changing issues existed.