

# State education chief makes no apology after tough session

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**NEW ORLEANS** — He was accused of arrogance and heavy-handedness by lawmakers during a session in which his major initiatives were defeated and bills he opposed were passed, but Louisiana Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek says the problem isn't his manner, it's the substance of what he wants to accomplish.

"I don't think that my style is really a problem," Pastorek said this week in a telephone interview. "I think that change is a problem. We have hundreds of thousands of kids who are not being served well by public schools in Louisiana. That means that change needs to come quickly. So I'm going to be passionate, and I'm going to be focused on making that change come as quickly as possible."

This year, Pastorek backed bills aimed at reining in the power of local school boards by limiting compensation of board members, imposing term limits on school boards and shielding local superintendents from interference by school board members in day-to-day personnel decisions.

Meanwhile, he was critical of a measure to create a new public school curriculum and high school diploma designed for poor-performing students who aim for blue-collar careers after graduation; and he fought efforts to allow Aiken Optional School in Rapides Parish avoid a state takeover for at least another year after four years of failing to meet requirements under the state school accountability system.

The school board measures failed; the career diploma and Aiken school bills passed, though Gov. Bobby Jindal vetoed the Aiken bill on Friday. Lawmakers who opposed Pastorek made no secret of their unhappiness with him.

During Senate floor debate on the Aiken measure, Sen. Joe McPherson, D-Woodworth, referred to him as "one arrogant individual who cares more about winning than he does about the education of our children."

That was after a testy exchange in a committee hearing on the bill between Pastorek and Sen. Yvonne Dorsey, D-Baton Rouge. Pastorek detailed state education department efforts to work with the school and the Rapides School Board on the issue, saying at one point, "We have spent an ungodly amount of time on this particular school." He later told the committee: "It's really inappropriate for this whole discussion to be here. Because there is a proper course of redress with the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education."

Dorsey didn't like being told the committee was doing something inappropriate. "That's why you make the big bucks," Dorsey added, a reference to Pastorek's state compensation package estimated at more than \$400,000 a year, "to spend 'ungodly' amounts of time on an issue that's this important."

Pastorek, whose contract is negotiated and approved by

BESE, then approved by a legislative budget panel, is in the second year of a four-year contract. He said he doesn't believe it is inappropriate for anyone to come to their legislators. "But I do think the Legislature should be thoughtful about stepping into situations where they've delegated control to others to handle them."

Was it the large-scale change that Pastorek is attempting, or his sometimes combative style that led to his legislative defeats this year?

"I think it's probably a combination of both," Barry Erwin, director of the independent watchdog agency Council for a Better Louisiana, said. The council was a strong supporter of Pastorek's defeated school board initiatives, as was the influential Louisiana Association of Business and Industry.

Erwin contrasted the style of Pastorek, a New Orleans attorney and former NASA general counsel, with that of former state education Superintendent Cecil Picard, who died of Lou Gehrig's disease in 2007. Picard was named state education superintendent in 1996 and worked with then-Gov. Mike Foster to pass the accountability program, which included provisions for controversial state takeovers of poorly performing local schools.

The soft-spoken Picard had come to the job after 20 years as a legislator and was adept at the give-and-take of the legislative process. "He certainly had a different touch with a lot of people in the education community than Paul Pastorek has," Erwin said.

"That said, I think what Paul is trying to do is absolutely the right thing."

Pastorek's adversaries outside of the Legislature give him credit for intelligence and devotion to education and are diplomatic in discussing his reputedly brusque personality. "Paul is very single-minded. He

pushes his projects with steadfastness. A lot of times, yeah, it does rub people wrong," said Lloyd Dressel, director of business for the Louisiana School Boards Association.

"It's how some may see me, you know?" said Steve Monaghan, president of the Louisiana Federation of Teachers. "If you're on the side of an issue and you're aggressively pursuing it, there can be an appearance of arrogance."

For his part, Pastorek believes too much is made of his sometimes prickly relationship with lawmakers.

"To the extent that people tend to focus on some of the challenges and some of the repartee that I have with legislators, that's only part of my engagement. There's a lot of the engagement that I have with people around the state of Louisiana that is very positive and very constructive and very successful, frankly. But that doesn't sell newspapers and doesn't sell ad time on television so you don't hear much about that."

He did score some victories in the legislative session, including passage of a bill lifting the limit on charter schools in the state.

But he also saw lawmakers cut more than \$7 million from the education budget late in the session. Pastorek discounted the possibility that the money was cut to punish him for his clashes with lawmakers. He said it was cut by lawmakers hoping to use the money to continue stipend payments to school employees including psychologists and social workers. How the department will deal with the cut will be determined in the coming weeks, he said.