

LA SUPERINTENDENT SACKS PRINCIPAL AND STAFF OVER ABUSE SCANDAL



Los Angeles schools Superintendent John Deasy was shocked to find out that the appalling and disgusting behavior of a class teacher, who is accused of playing classroom sex games with the children, was doing it for years. Concerned about how such a heinous case was not brought to light earlier and how it was allowed to go on hindered, he termed it as a "culture of silence." Construing silence as abdication of responsibility, he removed the school's entire staff, from custodians to the principal, to show that he meant business and that he was willing to take a tough call, where child safety was concerned. "It was a quick, responsible, responsive action to a heinous situation," he said. "We're not going to spend a long time debating student safety." Whilst many have applauded his courageous and speedy action, some have criticized it, but some see it as necessary wake-up call for the sluggish administration at America's second-largest school district. The 51-year old Superintendent is known to put in 18-hour days to set right and improve things in the 660,000-pupil Los Angeles Unified School District. He is known to make unscheduled surprise visits to classrooms, cleaning playgrounds of hazardous and unhealthy litter. He has also beseeched the city's rich for donations and squabbled with Sacramento politicians over funding cuts. He has also gained a reputation of a sheriff coming to clean up the town in the old Westerns. Quick on the draw, his on-the-spot decision making approach has been criticized by some as domineering. Earlier this year, during a visit to a school, when he saw the students doing busy work, he ordered the substitute teacher to be fired pronto. "I'm intolerant when it comes to students being disrespected," he said in an interview sandwiched between school visits and meetings. "I do what I think is right and everyone has the right to criticize. You appreciate the critics, but you wouldn't get up in the morning if you listened to them." Living by his own set of unique rules that defy conventional logic, he has been seen being on the side of plaintiffs who sued the district over closely protected teachers' union tenets — seniority-based layoff policies and leaving out student test scores in teacher performance evaluations. Needless to say, the courts ruled in the plaintiffs favor. A.J. Duffy, the former president of the teachers union United Teachers Los Angeles, who now runs a charter school, accused him of bypassing existing processes. He said, "He acts on behalf of kids, you can't fault him for that. But there are processes. People do deserve a fair and equitable hearing." Deasy feels that the best way to reform a school is to have a strong, competent man at the helm. As the last academic year ended he was determined to hire 80 new principals, whom he said, he would interview himself, to ensure that they fit his bill. Just as he is keen on hiring quality leaders he is equally keen on discarding those that do not fit into his scheme of things. He pushed 50 principals out or transferred them. He was deeply concerned about providing strong leaders at some urban high schools that were often referred to as "dropout factories." Everything that he does, he does speedily. He almost seems to be running short of time and is in a hurry to accomplish things, whether it is his list of candidates, his reform agenda or his striding around school campuses, inspecting everything from playgrounds, to classrooms, to cafeteria. "Keeping up with Dr. Deasy" is either a welcome joke or a threat, depending on whether you are watching from the sidelines or you are part of his reform agenda. He has set himself deadlines to ensure that the proposed reforms are in place within 4 years and that the reforms should reflect in higher test scores, graduation rates and other education metrics in eight years. "The culture in this district has been talk, protest, argue, not actually do," he said. "This style has come up against that." School board President Monica Garcia approves Deasy's speed and said that his style of working has made him admired and well-liked by the people, "People are feeling very confident in his leadership," she said. He has changed his lifestyle to ensure that every minute counts and that it propels him towards his goals in this race against time. He is up at 3.30, followed an early morning run. He checks his emails and the news, before commencing office meetings that have been scheduled as early as 5.30 a.m. So preoccupied is Deasy with his work that it is often that he skips meals. He stores energy bars in an office drawer and a recent lunch was just frozen yogurt. His thin physique, his crew cut soldier style hair, all evidence, that he could do with a little more nutritional nourishment. He works on Saturday's and Sunday's as well but keeps Sunday night free for Patty, his wife of 27 years. They have three grown up children who live in the Los Angeles area. He says that given the pace he is not afraid of waning enthusiasm or exhaustion. But he says, he does worry about distrust and cynicism. "It's 101 percent negativity all the time," he said. He revels in the accomplishments and feels happy when the results reflect the efforts put in. So far he has seen increases in language proficiency rates for English learners and there is a marked decline in dropouts and suspensions. He sees these and other accomplishments as rewards of giving teachers more autonomy and making graduation requirements tougher. What school manages dread most are his spontaneous, without warning visits? Once a week he will instruct his driver to take him to some of the 1,000 plus schools in the district. Once there he introduces himself to students as "Dr. D." He then proceeds to elicit as much information as possible from all avenues possible. He shapes his managing styles garnered from his advisor, Kevin Sharer, the former chief executive of Amgen, the world's largest biotech company which had a budget of \$6 billion dollars and 65,000 employees. However, the case of the Miramonte Elementary School teacher Mark Berndt had him stumped. He was totally unprepared to stand in judgment of a teacher, accused of getting his students to eat students cookies smeared with his semen in "tasting games." Deasy's blanket removal of the entire school's staff resulted in a howl of remonstrations from aggrieved parents and unions. Deasy has since said, that the teachers, who were shifted to another location, "may now return to the classroom at Miramonte or another school." He however, asked principals to reopen teacher wrongdoing files of the last 4 decades. A specially constituted review plan will inspect the files to establish if any past misdemeanor warrants further action. Some 500, until that time, unreported cases have been forwarded so far to the state teacher licensing commission. Teachers union President Warren Fletcher has blasted the move as "hasty and counterproductive" and alleges that it is to camouflage and sidetrack from managerial failures. The biggest challenges facing the district are its financial problems. The district lost \$2.7 billion in state funding, resulting in the laying off of 12,000 employees over the past five years. "He got handed a pretty rough plate," said Charles Kerchner, education professor at Claremont Graduate University. "The whole district is sort of teetering financially." Deasy is lobbying the elite of the city and has created a foundation, 'The Los Angeles Fund for Public Education,' to seek private donors. "That a city this size and this wealthy does not invest more philanthropically in its public education, that, to me, has been pretty amazing," he said. Deasy's parents were educators, yet he wanted to be a doctor rather than a teacher, but destiny willed otherwise. He made a success of whatever he did and served as superintendent at school districts in Rhode Island, California and Maryland. He was ecstatic when he got the chance to go to LAUSD, a district whose demographics appealed to him. It is a district that is 73 percent Latino and 80 percent low income. "This is where it matters," he said. "Delivering opportunities to kids." He says that what keeps him going is to ensure that the privileges granted to him as a white person, should be afforded to others as well. His office is decorated with pictures of Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King Jr. and a Barack Obama "Hope" poster. Recently when during a visit to a school, two seniors confronted him and told him that they were the first in their families to graduate high school and wanted to pursue criminal justice studies at community college. He congratulated them with gusto and a broad smile on his face. "You see these men," he said later. "It's what keeps you going."