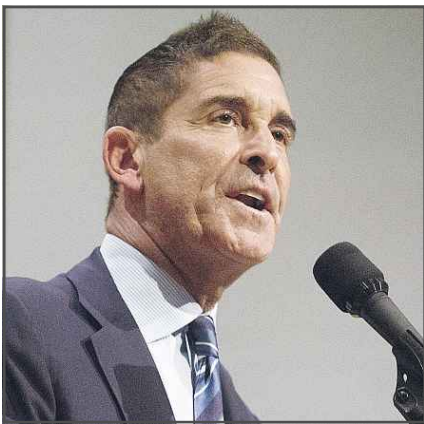


Sexual Misconduct Accusation

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SUPERINTENDENT

Lawyer questions Hempstead vote that forced leave

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND
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The attorney for Hempstead's embattled schools chief Shimon Waronker on Wednesday challenged the legitimacy of the decision by three board trustees to place the superintendent on administrative leave, saying Waronker was a victim of "mob mentality."

Waronker, who took over Hempstead's system in early June, was shelved late Tuesday night in a 3-2 vote. The action came following a raucous meeting punctuated by jeers directed at the superintendent — demonstrations that often drowned out his attempts to defend his administration and that district authorities made no concerted effort to stop.

Frederick Brewington, a Hempstead attorney representing the superintendent, said his client will not "buy into the mob-like mentality of trying to match the level of discord and abuse."

"I understand they were singing, 'Hit the road, Jack, don't you come back no more no more,'" Brewington said, referring to the famous tune that a spectator played on the piano at the end of the meeting in Hempstead High School auditorium, with other audience members joining in song.

"This is supposed to be the highest level of decision-making to benefit the educational future of children," the lawyer said. "It is not a pep rally for a basketball game."

Brewington declined to predict whether the schools chief would file a lawsuit against the district's board majority. He did say, however, that administrative leave in this case was a punitive act that "will be tested in the proper forum."

The board has another meeting at 7 p.m. Thursday.

Brewington was not alone in his critical assessment of Hempstead board meetings. A state-appointed special adviser to the district, Jack Bierwirth, a former



ON LEAVE

Shimon Waronker, shown at Tuesday's board meeting, has been placed on administrative leave and barred from school property.

Long Island superintendent, found in a report released Monday that the sessions often are "long and rancorous," reflecting deep divisions and "an inability to collaborate on even commonly shared concerns."

Trustees David Gates, LaMont Johnson and Randy Stith hold the current balance of power and voted to place Waronker on administrative leave. Board president Maribel Touré and vice president Gwendolyn Jackson voted against the action.

Waronker, under conditions set by the board's three-member majority, will be barred from school property and not allowed to participate in operations of the 8,000-student district. He will continue receiving full pay and benefits.

Brewington's contention that the move was essentially punitive is a point that could become crucial in any legal action. Waronker's four-year, \$265,000-a-year contract provides that he will not be suspended,

disciplined or fired without the right to an impartial hearing. "They call it administrative leave, but suspension by another name is still suspension," Brewington said.

Over the weekend, Waronker posted an extraordinary "open letter" to residents on the district's website, describing reforms he had sought to implement and saying the board majority had derailed his efforts to root out corruption, mismanagement and waste.

"Politics, self-interests, patronage, vendettas, threats, and cover-ups cannot rule the day," he wrote in the two-page letter. "The transformation which is necessary in Hempstead will not happen without hard work, transparency, honesty and commitment to meaningful change."

The letter remained on the website through Tuesday. By Wednesday morning, it no longer appeared.

Tuesday night, many audience members cheered when they

VS. SCHOOL BOARD



THE MAJORITY

From left, Randy Stith, David Gates and LaMont Johnson comprise the school board's majority. They voted to place Waronker on leave.

learned that Regina Armstrong, the district's associate superintendent for elementary curriculum and instruction, was being named acting superintendent in Waronker's absence. Armstrong, 50, has worked for 28 years in the Hempstead district.

Armstrong told Newsday in a phone interview Wednesday that her first order of business would be carrying out Bierwirth's state-backed recommendations for comprehensive planning to improve the district's academic performance, student security and physical plant.

"The focus is going to be on the students, and we're going to continue to put systems in place that will improve the learning environment," she said.

Some residents contended this week that public expressions of exasperation with the superintendent were justified.

Waronker won high marks for turning around troubled schools in New York City, but his Hempstead tenure has been marked by complaints that he acted too quickly in replacing popular administrators with candidates of his own choosing. "I'm not going to lie to you, I'm glad — I'm overjoyed — the superintendent is gone," said Cheryl Wyche, a Hempstead resident at the board meeting.

Leslie McShine, president of a civic activist group, Hempstead for Hempstead, agreed. "Enough is enough," McShine said.

Wyche and McShine are among those who regularly go to

the panel's meetings and in the past have filed petitions to the state education commissioner on various matters, including the outcome of board elections.

Parents interviewed Wednesday outside Barack Obama Elementary School said they knew little or nothing of the controversy over Waronker's tenure. But many expressed concern about the same issues of building maintenance and student security detailed in Bierwirth's report.

Rina Nunez, 42, voiced frustration about the district. "It's not secure," she said. She had concerns about drug sales outside a school and said she was worried about Monday's closure of the Obama school over a burst water pipe and lack of heat. As for the board, she said, "All I care about is my son having the right education."

Those sentiments were echoed by Maria Cortez, 35, who has sons in the 10th grade at Hempstead High and the first grade at Obama Elementary, and a daughter in prekindergarten.

The district is "not good," she said. Her 10th-grader, who has special needs, "said he didn't want to go to school" and complaints of gang activity and bullying. "I think they need to change personnel," she said.

With Scott Eidler

EDITORIAL

Time nears for stronger action in Hempstead **A24**



STEPPING IN

Regina Armstrong has spent her 28-year career with the Hempstead school district.

Stand-in's approach: Do the work, avoid the 'noise'

BY SCOTT EIDLER
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Regina Armstrong, named the Hempstead school system's acting superintendent amid a tumult in leadership, is a familiar face to students and longtime residents.

Armstrong, now 50, joined the district in 1990 and has spent her entire professional career there — a 28-year run during which she rose from teaching second grade to be associate superintendent for elementary curriculum and instruction. She also held positions as a curriculum specialist, assistant principal and principal.

The school board named her acting superintendent Tuesday after it voted 3-2 to place Superintendent Shimon Waronker on administrative leave.

"I think everyone is clear what the challenges [are] we face in Hempstead schools," she said in an interview Wednesday. "I plan on overcoming the challenge by staying focused, doing the work, and trying my best not to be distracted by the other noise in the sys-

tem. We have to make sure the focus is back on the students."

The Rockville Centre resident has an annual salary of nearly \$185,250, according to state data as of Sept. 1, 2017.

She vowed to implement recommendations spelled out by Jack Bierwirth, the district's state-appointed special adviser, in a report released Monday.

Armstrong said she prides herself on "a great background in literacy, ELA [English Language Arts], reading, as well as being a team player known to get the job done."

Deborah DeLong, 65, who serves as assistant superintendent for pupil personnel services, praised Armstrong's knowledge of curriculum matters, saying she is "extremely knowledgeable at her area and a very fast learner."

Previous superintendents "all leaned on her very heavily for information and guidance," she said. "She's a smart lady."

Armstrong said her first job in the district was teaching second-graders at Franklin Elementary School, then second- and fifth-graders at Prospect

School. She became a curriculum specialist at Prospect and later was assistant principal.

Stints followed as assistant principal at Franklin Elementary, Alverta B. Gray Schultz Middle School, and Fulton Elementary — now Paterson Elementary — where she began as principal in the 2007-08 school year. She started in her most recent position of associate superintendent in July 2013.

Armstrong received her bachelor's degree in elementary education and sociology from Queens College, from which she also earned a professional diploma in school and district administration. She holds a master's degree from Hofstra University in Reading K-12. She is pursuing a doctoral degree from Indiana-based American College of Education, which offers online degrees targeted toward working educators.

She was among six community leaders honored by the Hempstead NAACP last summer for "outstanding contributions" in the fight for freedom.

With John Hildebrand