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PAUL VALLAS, school district CEO



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MARTIN G. BEDNAREK, School Reform Commission member

# SRC rakes Vallas over budget coals

They voice chagrin, withhold words of support; meanwhile, he calls \$73.3 M deficit 'manageable'

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AT LEAST three members of the School Reform Commission yesterday asked harsh questions about the school district's \$73.3 million budget deficit, with one of them saying he felt "betrayed" by the district's chief executive, Paul Vallas.

"Last April, I was told we were on solid financial ground," said commissioner Martin G. Bednarek. "Now, five months later, we're looking at this deficit. . . .

"As a member of the School Reform Commission, I really feel betrayed."

Also voicing pointed criticism of Vallas were commissioners James Gallagher and Daniel Whelan. Both Whelan and Gallagher had voted giving Vallas a raise and a three-year contract extension in late August.

After yesterday's hearing SRC chairman James Nevels was asked if he still supported Vallas as CEO.

Nevels first said, "I stand behind the children of this school district." He said the whole purpose of the SRC was to bring about cost efficiency to the district.

Then asked again if he supported Vallas, Nevels said, "We have a contract with him," and added that the SRC would honor that contract.

Vallas, reached later by telephone, said that as chief executive officer he is prepared to accept responsibility for the deficit.

"We tried to do a lot, and we've hit a wall," Vallas said. "You get a lot of praise when the budgets are balanced and test scores are going up and when we've opened up

five new high schools.

"If you're going to take the praise, you need to also take the heat."

But Vallas said he didn't consider the \$73.3 million shortfall a "crisis."

"It's really a manageable deficit," he said.

Vallas said he believes that Nevels and the SRC have confidence in him, adding that the SRC could cancel his contract anytime.

Mayor Street attended yesterday's nearly four-hour hearing, as he did on Wednesday.

Again, he and other members of the public repeatedly called on the SRC to hold hearings in the evenings, when more working parents and teachers can attend.

Yesterday, Veronica Joyner, founder of the Math, Civics and Sciences Charter School, brought nearly 200 charter-school elementary students dressed in navy-blue and white school uniforms to the hearing.

She was one of several speakers to denounce the recent call by the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers for a moratorium on new charter schools. She said it has been largely charter-school students' test scores that have been responsible for the overall improvement of the district's test scores.

Patricia Toy, a parent with a child at the Greenfield school in Center City, said "leveling down" (moving teachers from schools with small classes to those with larger classes) last month caused the school to lose a teacher, resulting in three fourth-grade classrooms being merged into two.

She said the principal had a special class of 16 students who were below grade level and who were getting more individual attention than other students for the purpose of bringing up their test scores. Now those 16 pupils are mixed in with the larger classrooms and can't get the help they need.

Toy said parents are thinking of leaving the public-school system because of the crowded classes.

Jalita Lyde, a junior at Mastbaum in Frankford, said she be-



Photos: TOMONORI KUBO/Daily News

Members of the student activist group Youth United for Change rally at yesterday's hearing.

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