

Education Superintendent John White's job expected to spark debate at BESE meeting in August

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A member of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education said Monday she wants the panel to vote next month on whether state Superintendent of Education John White should keep his job.

"I feel like BESE has been a little remiss in not addressing this," said Kathy Edmonston, who lives in Gonzales. "That is my sole purpose."

Edmonston said she is still working on exactly what her motion will say.

But the aim, she said, is to gauge support for White on the 11-member panel, which sets policies for about 700,000 public school students statewide.

"I am not trying to cause anything," Edmonston said.

"I feel like we are divided enough in the state," she said. "But I just feel like we have not done what we need to do as a board."

White, who has held the job for 5 1/2 years, is paid \$275,000 per year.

However, for the past 18 months he has been working on a month-to-month contract because backers lacked enough support on BESE to extend the agreement.

Even critics concede that any bid to replace White is an uphill fight.

The superintendent often has majority support -- six votes -- on key issues and sometimes seven.

In addition, it takes a super majority of the board -- eight of 11 members -- to hire a new superintendent.

"I feel certain that what we will see as a result of the vote is that a majority of BESE members want John White to stay and continue to do the good work that he has been doing in the state," said BESE member Jim Garvey, who lives in Metairie.

Edmonston's proposal is set for discussion at the same board meeting

Aug. 15-16 where White is scheduled to undergo his annual job evaluation.

Brigitte Nieland, who follows public school issues for the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, said Edmonston has been considering the issue for a couple of months.

Nieland said any concerns about White's job performance could be discussed during his job evaluation rather than spending "negative energy" on a separate debate.

"If they want to address anything that is a much more constructive way to address it," she said.

Edmonston, who was elected in 2015, criticized White during the campaign and the rollout of the Common Core academic standards, which White backed.

However, she has generally worked well with the superintendent for the past 18 months despite often being on opposite sides in key public school debates.

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BESE is set to hold its annual retreat on Aug. 14, committee meetings on Aug. 15 and the full board meeting on Aug. 16.

When any vote on his contract would take place is unclear.

White is scheduled to undergo his annual job review by BESE on Aug. 16.

He has won favorable marks in his four previous job evaluations.

"At this meeting I am going to be focused on my evaluation and whether my performance was up to the standards that BESE has established for me," White said Monday.

He also said he works well with Edmonston.

"I have enjoyed a strong relationship with Kathy Edmonston and have been privileged to work closely with her on issues in her district, including a very difficult issue related to charter schools in

Bogalusa," White said.

BESE's agenda is set to be made public on Aug. 5.

The superintendent already faces scrutiny on the legal front.

Edwards said last week his office is reviewing White's job status in connection with a failed lawsuit aimed at removing him.

Despite earlier comments, governor stands down on bid to replace Education Superintendent John White

Gov. John Bel Edwards is putting off his vow to try to replace state Superintendent of Education.

Edwards, a longtime critic of White, said litigation may be needed on whether the superintendent should have undergone a second Senate confirmation hearing, and whether the failure to do so means the office should be vacated.

Edmonston said that, if BESE had voted earlier on White's contract, the lawsuit might have played out differently.

Edmonston also said that, while she works well with the superintendent, critics of White are plentiful in her BESE district.

"My constituency is not for John White," she said. "They weren't for White when I was campaigning and they are not now."