

## **Alonso's brisk style hastened Morris misstep - Baltimore schools chief says he didn't know of new deputy's financial problems**

By Julie Bykowicz, *Baltimore Sun*, June 14, 2009

Andrés Alonso wasn't particularly interested in salary when he took over Baltimore schools two years ago. What he wanted was guaranteed authority, even insisting on a provision in his four-year contract that prohibits the school board from telling him what to do.

Within two weeks, Alonso was interviewing school principal candidates and demanding to personally approve all long-term student suspensions and expulsions. His leadership, aggressive and sure-footed, has mostly served him well as he works to reform a battered school system. Test scores and graduation rates have gone up, and the exodus of students has stopped.

But Alonso's bullish style has a significant downside, city and state leaders say, and it emerged last week when he hired the freshly departed school board chairman - a man who helped hire him and give him the latitude he so desired - to an unadvertised, six-figure administrative job. His pick, real estate developer Brian D. Morris, is mired in financial troubles, including foreclosure and accusations of fraud, which Alonso said he did not know about.

Amid the growing controversy, the school board held a three-hour emergency meeting Friday with Alonso to discuss Morris' fate. Morris, 38, resigned from his new position Saturday. Alonso said after the resignation, "None of us are magicians. A superintendent can stumble. ... The bottom line is outcomes for kids."

Now the charismatic schools chief must deal with the fallout from what some say was a poor decision that smacked of favoritism. Both state and city leaders have oversight of Baltimore schools. Alonso must seek to win back top leaders on both levels, including [Mayor Sheila Dixon](#) and state lawmakers, who were dismayed by the entire situation.

To be sure, Alonso must have calculated that the benefits of hiring Morris were substantial. The former school board chairman, an ally of Gov. Martin O'Malley, was well-positioned to serve as a liaison and buffer between the city school board and the schools executive.

Urban schools chiefs, especially those billed as reformers, typically arrive to great fanfare that stretches into a generous honeymoon phase. When the inevitable missteps occur, it is political savvy and stockpiled good will that determine the speed of a leader's recovery. Alonso, who turns 52 today, had yet to be tested in this way.

New York schools chief Joel Klein, Alonso's former boss, has taken heat from state lawmakers who have called him a micromanager. In Washington, Michelle Rhee was criticized for firing the principal of the high-performing school her own children attend. Yet both have the continued support of their mayors.

Paul Vallas, who led reforms in Chicago and Philadelphia and now heads the New

Orleans Recovery School District, said controversies such as the one Alonso now finds himself in "can really bog down the most effective superintendent."

"Particularly if you are riding a wave of popularity, if you don't have any vulnerabilities, that's when your detractors are going to be looking to create one for you," said Vallas, who knows Alonso from national educational circles and said the Baltimore schools chief has "an excellent reputation."

That's not to say Alonso didn't make a mistake in this case. Vallas said schools chiefs must constantly weigh whether a high-profile hiring decision is worth the inevitable scrutiny. He said he always advertises top positions, even if he has a candidate in mind. "Even if it is harmless, even if you have the very best person, you have to ask whether it's worth the controversies it'll stir up," he said. "You have to show that you're not just making a job up for somebody."

The lack of communication about the new position that Alonso tapped Morris for - combined with the fact that it comes as other school administrators are being laid off amid budget cuts - angered some elected officials who saw the hiring as an outgrowth of bravado by Alonso.

Sen. Joan Carter Conway, a Baltimore Democrat and chairwoman of the Senate committee that oversees education, said she wasn't surprised by the "bad move" of hiring Morris.

"It seems to be part of his management style," Carter Conway said. "He makes a decision and moves on to implementation without weighing the pros and cons of it."

She said she saw that same behavior when he decided "at the 11th hour" last year to close schools without talking to parents and community members. "That's not the process. You can't just close schools and move on."

State lawmakers, she said, might examine "tweaks" to the role of the schools chief executive - a position created through legislation more than a decade ago. "We need to look at giving more authority to the mayor as it relates to the superintendent," she said. "You don't want to tie an individual's hands all the way, but it definitely needs to be looked at, in my opinion."

At the city level, Dixon "fully supports" Alonso, said her spokesman, Scott Peterson. "At the same time, she has relayed concerns about this particular decision before and after this hiring decision was made public," he said.

In an interview Wednesday, Dixon said the timing of Morris' hiring, just as he was leaving the school board, "raised an eyebrow" and was "probably not the best practice."

Three City Council members were so distressed by the Morris situation that they voted against the schools budget Thursday night. One of them, Mary Pat Clarke, said creating a high-salaried position at a time when other positions are being cut was particularly troubling. James B. Kraft and William H. Cole IV also voted against the schools budget.

Other state-level lawmakers, including Del. Cheryl D. Glenn, a former city teachers

union leader, want to convene a meeting of Baltimore's Annapolis delegation to review the Morris appointment and other Alonso-related issues. Glenn called the Morris hiring "impropriety bordering on an ethics situation. It might cause more of my colleagues to be concerned where they might not have necessarily had issues [with Alonso] before."

Morris' school board term was set to expire this summer, and he announced to his fellow board members Tuesday that he had stepped down. Moments later, they approved his new \$175,000-per-year position as deputy chief executive officer for operations. Alonso had not interviewed any other candidates.

It's unclear whether Alonso's sometimes tenuous relationship with O'Malley will suffer from the revelation that Alonso didn't properly advertise the new position or vet the only candidate. The schools chief and governor butted heads this year when Alonso accused O'Malley of destroying years of education gains by proposing a 2.9 percent reduction in the city schools budget. O'Malley called the statement "patently false." Federal stimulus money later helped plug the budget holes, and the two maintain a decent working relationship, aides say.

Still, hiring Morris to a top administrative job could have been viewed as a way to fortify the bond between the city school system and the governor's office. In 2000, when O'Malley was Baltimore mayor, he appointed Morris as interim director of minority business development. O'Malley and Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. then jointly appointed Morris to the school board in 2003, pointing to his business expertise.

Just after the school board approved Morris' new job Tuesday night, O'Malley issued a statement congratulating him, calling him "uniquely qualified."

The governor has declined to comment specifically on the appointment process and Morris' financial situation.

Alonso might also have viewed Morris as an intermediary with the city school board, on which he served for six years. An ardent Alonso supporter, Morris was also popular with his colleagues.

Clarke said most elected officials believe Alonso "has been doing a very good job." But she noted that this controversial hire was typical of his style. She compared it to his controversial decision to combine middle schools with high schools last year.

"He decided he wanted it, and he moved forward like he always does," she said of Alonso hiring Morris. "That's one of the reasons he has been successful here. Like everything, it has its upsides and its downsides. He just pushes ahead, but [elected officials] like me have suffered a lot of the consequences."