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Educator's definite ideas inspire mixed opinions

Cherry Hill's changes have won Morton Sherman allies, foes - and a new deal.<

Maureen Fitzgerald INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

When the school board renewed Superintendent Morton Sherman's contract with a hefty raise last week, there were those who cheered and those who felt depressed.

To those who admire him, Sherman is a visionary leader who has reduced class sizes, revamped a tired curriculum, brought innovative programs, and had a \$53 million bond issue passed - the district's first in 30 years - to start repairing long-neglected buildings in South Jersey's largest suburban school district.

His critics say he is a smooth-talking, egotistical leader looking to build a national reputation for himself by pushing through the latest programs at a breakneck pace with little support for teachers or interest in dissenting opinions.

Sherman, who almost was lured away this year by a Connecticut school district, signed a contract for five more years, with a salary-and-benefits package that could cost the district up to \$212,000 in his final year in 2005-06. He has led Cherry Hill's schools for five years.

"I am very happy that Dr. Sherman decided to stay," said Pat Koper, president of the Board of Education. "Clearly, I think we have come a long way - for the better. Dr.

Sherman is very focused on moving the district forward. He's bright, articulate, well-read and well-researched."

But Donna William Snow, the mother of a freshman at Cherry Hill High School West, expressed a different outlook.

"To me, it's all these new, jazzy programs to give him panache in his reign as superintendent, to make him look good," she said.

There is one thing no one disputes: Sherman has brought enormous change to the district's 19 schools, which serve about 11,300 students.

Perhaps most significant is the district's "standard-based learning" initiative, a philosophy of teaching lessons and measuring students' success through a set of standards.

In Cherry Hill, the process required teachers to write hundreds of standards or goals, describing what students are expected to know in every subject at every grade, and then model their lessons accordingly.

Under Sherman's direction, the district also launched the alternative International Baccalaureate program, which concentrates on languages, community service and cultural studies; reopened a third middle school; opened enrollment between schools; started teaching foreign language and algebra in middle school; increased the number of advanced-placement classes; initiated a minority-achievement program; and launched a testing policy eliminating midterms and allowing students to retake tests.

Some of the changes, especially the testing policy, have been questioned by parents and teachers, but Sherman has stood firm.

The district also has experienced a huge employee turnover under his watch, with 40 percent of the district's current teachers and 75 percent of its principals hired during his administration.

Sherman, 52, a tall, broad-shouldered man who dresses in formal suits and ties and polished wing tips, speaks with an air of authority, often peppering his speech with quotes from education experts and books they have written.

"Have you read William Glasser, Schools Without Failure?" he asked one morning while visiting an elementary school. "He says within the first 10 minutes you can smell a good school."

Sherman said he believed that the Cherry Hill schools had been in need of major changes, and that transitions are not always easy.

"I inherited a district that was resting on its laurels," he said. "Sometimes you have to create dissonance to move forward. Sometimes, that sparks conversations and makes things better."

For many teachers, accustomed to following a traditional textbook, the change to standards was enormous. Teachers had to revamp their lessons, working backward from the goals for students. And the standards had to be posted in every room and incorporated in every lesson plan.

An example of one math standard posted in a fifth-grade classroom: "A student demonstrates an understanding of the nature of mathematics and applies basic number concepts."

While many teachers support the initiative, saying the standards keep them focused on what they want to accomplish for the day, others say the standards are just the latest educational trend or the bare minimum of what a student can achieve.

Many parents are not quite sure what to make of them.

"I can understand Shakespeare, but I can't understand those standards," said Snow, the Cherry Hill West parent and a professor of theater at Temple University. "When I walked in the classroom and saw those things posted on the board, I felt like I was in Russia

during the communist regime. They are vague, meaningless statements."

Bill Hackbarth, who retired in December from Sharp Elementary School after 36 years of teaching elementary school in the district, said he believes standards are the future.

"But I do think the district moved too fast," he said. ". . . It was such an enormous jolt to the way we had done things for so long. There wasn't time to hone the curriculum. Teachers were overwhelmed. There were too many demands in too many categories. And we still haven't figured out what to do with students who aren't meeting the standard after the third or fourth attempt.

"But I do think that once it has all evolved, the standards will be a very powerful tool for teachers."

Sherman said he was not willing to wait until every piece was perfect. "We have to move forward," he said.

"My job is to move over 1,400 employees at 19 different schools involving over 11,300 kids and their parents in a direction that is absolutely focused on having each and every student achieve," Sherman said.

That is his mantra - anyone who has spent five minutes with him will have heard it - and it may harken from his childhood.

Sherman was born and raised in Allentown, one of five sons of an auto mechanic who never finished high school.

"My dad would come home every night with grease under his fingernails and say: 'Education, education, education,' " Sherman said.

Sherman listened and, literally, made those words his life. After receiving an English degree from Pennsylvania State University in 1971, he got his master's in English education from the University of Delaware and his doctorate in educational foundations from Lehigh University.

He taught English for six years before beginning his career as an administrator in Westport and Norwich, Conn., and then in South Orangetown in New York, where he was superintendent for five years before he came to Cherry Hill in 1997.

He often puts in 16-hour days, including meetings four nights a week, except Thursdays, when he plays basketball.

He also plays pickup games with the girls' basketball team at Cherry Hill West, where players say they will not guard him too closely because he drips so much sweat.

"He goes through like three shirts a game," one player said. "He doesn't have much of a shot," said another.

But Sherman vehemently protested.

"I was the highest scorer in our league last season," he said, referring to the Jewish Community Center South Jersey Men's League. "I averaged 21.9 points per game."

His wife is a teacher in Voorhees, and he has three daughters, only one still at home, a junior at Cherry Hill High School East. He said he had not taken a vacation in two years.

"There is still a lot of work to be done," he said, "but all the pieces are in place."

After five years of upheaval and change, Sherman promised the district in his next five years "a time of calm, which is well-deserved."

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Illustration:PHOTO

SHARON GEKOSKI-KIMMEL / Inquirer Suburban Staff

Superintendent Morton Sherman is joined by Clara Woods, 8, of Cherry Hill, during a meeting of the school board.

JOAN FAIRMAN KANES / Inquirer Suburban Staff

Superintendent Morton Sherman, who has a new five-year contract, is considered visionary by some in Cherry Hill and egotistical by others. "Standard-based learning" is perhaps his most significant initiative since his arrival in '97.

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