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Schools chief shocks district, will leave in '06

Morton Sherman's eight years have been marked by

controversy. He is looking for something "different."

Kristen A. Graham INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Controversial, hard-charging Superintendent Morton Sherman, who has led Cherry Hill schools for eight years, resigned last night, effective next June.

The move was a bombshell to many in the district of 11,500 students, coming just hours before a meeting in which the school board could have decided his fate and would likely have voted to not renew his contract.

Sherman, 55, had attracted ardent supporters in Cherry Hill for his focus on innovation and standards. But he also acquired detractors who said he had an egotistical style, alienated teachers, and pushed through unpopular programs without the support of the community.

The superintendent said his decision had been motivated by personal and professional reasons.

"It's an opportunity to look at a different job, a different place, a different something.

There's a real sense of needing to step back and take stock," Sherman said.

The school board "wishes the superintendent well in whatever endeavors he chooses to pursue," President Cindy Trubin said, adding that having a lame-duck superintendent for a full school year would not be a problem for the district.

"I believe we have a very professional staff that's dedicated to the kids, and they'll all do their best to make sure the needs of all the kids are met."

Dozens packed the board meeting last night - most to thank Sherman or to plead with him not to leave. They were stunned and angry at the board for allowing him to leave, even teary-eyed.

"It was like a rock hit me in the center of the chest," Bill McCargo said of hearing the news.

A lifelong resident of the township and former board member, McCargo has seen superintendents come and go.

"Mort, you've exceeded every one of them," he said.

Not everyone shared that sentiment. Carrie Roldan-Rosenthal said she was relieved that Sherman had tendered his resignation.

"I think you've taken us down a path that's been very divisive," she said. "I don't think you've been positive for the school district."

Sherman arrived in Cherry Hill from Blauvelt, N.Y., where he was superintendent of South Orangetown schools for five years.

In Cherry Hill, he will be remembered for reducing class sizes, pushing through the first bond issue in 30 years to build new classrooms, and helping to narrow the minority achievement gap.

But the International Baccalaureate program will loom large in his legacy, for better or worse. Though it is growing in popularity nationwide, the rigorous cross-curricular course of study was extremely controversial in Cherry Hill, and Sherman's fondness for it angered many.

Beyond the schools, he was a public persona in the township. After his daughter Rachel attempted suicide, he held her hand and shared the podium with her as she detailed her path to recovery and encouraged others to get help. Last year, the family shared the young woman's struggle with cancer.

Sherman yesterday called that event the catalyst for his decision to leave, which he said was not an easy one.

"It's been one of those life awakenings that has caused me to look at the value of life and family and friendship," he said. "This is truly a refocusing and a gathering of what's important." Sherman and his wife, Debbie, have three daughters.

"Over the past eight years, I have, with great love for the kids of Cherry Hill, sacrificed part of my kids' growing up," he said. "There's a real sense of accomplishment, and it feels like this is the right time given the new board, given the eight years."

Sherman said the sparks that had already begun flying on the new board, where a majority now opposes his leadership, were certainly a factor. "I don't want to either contribute or be part of that," he said.

A full year will give him time to decide what comes next - perhaps another district. "I imagine, at this point in my career, there's probably one more superintendency left in me," he said.

The manner of his resignation was typical of Sherman: Delivered at the eleventh hour, it allowed him, and not the school board, to control the message.

He issued a statement just before the meeting.

"We have admirably well met parents' expectations as we have continued the great traditions of this district and set new standards which will guide the district in the years ahead," Sherman said. "I am appreciative of the support this community has given me, our family, and the work in which we believe so deeply."

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Morton Sherman's Key Achievements

Reduced class sizes.

Focused on standards-based achievement.

Spearheaded a \$52.6 million bond issue in 1999 to improve facilities, the first bond issue in 30 years in Cherry Hill.

Moved to narrow the achievement gap: Test scores were broken down by race before the state mandated it, and a minority-achievement committee was formed.

Implemented the International Baccalaureate program.

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