

■ A Houston woman is accused of filing multiple bogus claims for federal disaster aid during Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Ike. **STORY ON PAGE B3**

Saavedra holds on to top spot at HISD

ABELARDO SAAVEDRA

■ **Age:** 57
■ **Family:** Wife, Myrna, a former teacher; two daughters
■ **Education:** Doctorate, University of Michigan; bachelor's and master's from Texas A&I University
■ **Experience:** Named superintendent in

December 2004 after six months as interim chief; also served as executive deputy superintendent in HISD; superintendent of Corpus Christi ISD, 1993-2000

■ **Annual base salary:** \$314,000

■ **Maximum bonus:** \$80,000

■ Move by school board extends his contract into '09

By **ERICKA MELLON**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

The Houston school board on Tuesday allowed Superintendent Abelardo Saavedra's contract to extend through 2009, giving a nod of approval to the sometimes divisive chief.

Over the last two months, board members have spent hours evaluating Saavedra behind closed doors, but they ultimately took no action to oust him — despite recent fears from Hispanic business leaders and elected officials.

"I think the board and the superintendent have made a good team over the last four

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SAAVEDRA: Meaning of contract is still disputed

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years," said Saavedra, the first Hispanic chief of the Houston Independent School District. "As in any relationship, we'll continue to work on that relationship for the benefit of the kids."

School board members made no comments at their public meeting Tuesday about Saavedra's performance or about his

contract extension.

But board President Harvin Moore confirmed in an interview that while the evaluation process was contentious at times, the board intended to let Saavedra's one-year contract extend another year, through at least December 2009.

"I'm not saying there wasn't tension. There's always plenty of tension in these types of dis-

cussions," Moore said. "But in the end the contract will renew automatically."

The deadline to give Saavedra notice is today, but the board has no meetings scheduled, meaning the contract will simply roll over.

Saavedra has drawn criticism for his handling of the district's \$805 million bond package, a hasty budget process and the employee performance pay program. Saavedra's supporters point to HISD's academic progress and healthy finances and note that districts nationwide are watching the HISD's bonus program.

Although Saavedra's job is safe for now, the meaning of his one-year contract has been in dispute, and it could end up costing taxpayers later.

Saavedra's attorney, Vidal Martinez, has said the board must give the superintendent more than a year's notice — and pay — before ending his contract. The board's attorney, David Thompson, has countered that Saavedra is guaranteed just three months' time.

Saavedra declined to settle the debate Tuesday.

"I did get on a one-year contract," he said. "But I'm not going to get in the middle of a contest between two attorneys."

Saavedra's annual salary is about \$314,000, plus a phone and a car allowance, and he is eligible for an \$80,000 performance bonus.

Saavedra, who has run the state's largest school district since 2004, said the board's

evaluation highlighted his flaws in communicating with stakeholders and the need to improve public confidence in the district. To improve in those areas, Saavedra reiterated his plan to hire an assistant superintendent of communications within the next few weeks. That person would oversee communications with the community, employees and the media.

The evaluation is kept confidential under state law.

Leaders of HISD's two largest teacher groups stayed neutral on whether Saavedra should remain. Saavedra's toughest battle with teachers has centered on the multimillion-dollar performance pay program, which Saavedra recommended and the school board approved without union support in January 2006.

"I think what's brought him to this position is too often he's chosen to go it alone," said Chuck Robinson, executive director of the Congress of Houston Teachers. "It doesn't make him an evil person. He's just not politically astute at times."

Saavedra said he has no plans to leave HISD. The average tenure of an urban school superintendent is less than five years, according to the National School Boards Association.

"I think (I will stay) as long as the relationship remains strong and we're making a difference in the lives of kids. I'm a young 57 right now," Saavedra said.

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