

# School chief gives back by giving up \$800K

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The Associated Press

## FRESNO, CALIF.

Some people give back to their community. Then there's Fresno County School Superintendent Larry Powell, who's really giving back. As in \$800,000 – what would have been his compensation for the next three years.

Until his term expires in 2015, Powell will run 325 schools and 35 school districts with 195,000 students, all for less than a starting California teacher earns.

"How much do we need to keep accumulating? There's no reason for me to keep stockpiling money," said Powell, 63.

His generosity is more than just a gesture in a region with some of the nation's highest rates of unemployment. As he prepares for retirement, he wants to ensure that his pet projects survive California budget cuts. And the man who started his career as a high school civics teacher, who has made anti-bullying his mission, hopes his act of generosity will help restore faith in the government he once taught students to respect.

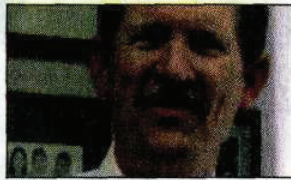
"A part of me has chafed at what they did in Bell," Powell said, recalling the Southern California city officials who secretly boosted their salaries by hundreds of thousands of dollars. "It's hard to believe that someone in the public trust would do that to the public. My wife and I asked ourselves 'What can we do that might restore confidence in government?'"

Powell's answer? Ask his board to allow him to return \$288,241 in salary and benefits for the next 3½ years of his term. He technically retired, then agreed to be hired back to work for \$31,000 a year – \$10,000 less than a first-year teacher – and with no benefits.

"I thought it was so very generous on his part," said school board member Sally Tannenbaum. "We get to keep him, but at a much lower rate."

His move was so low-key, his manner so unassuming, that it took four days after the school board meeting for word of his act to get out to the community. There were no press releases or self-congratulatory pats on the back.

"Things like this are what America is all about," said friend and former Fresno



his new salary

# \$31K

For the next 3½ years, Fresno County School Superintendent Larry Powell will return \$288,241 in salary and benefits.

Mayor Alan Autry. "America is as much about overcoming obstacles in difficult times as it is opulence. This reminds me of the great sacrifices made throughout our history, especially the Great Depression."

No one has been more surprised about the positive reaction than Powell, who didn't realize that what he did was newsworthy. He chuckles at his desk when yet another email arrives from a colleague blown away by his generosity. Two days after word got out he had received 200 messages on his

Facebook page.

"When you make good choices, good things happen to you," said Powell, who tends to talk in the kind of uplifting phrases that also make him a sought-after motivational speaker.

He even sees as an asset his childhood contraction of polio, which left him with a limp and a brace, and now a lingering post-polio syndrome.

"It's the most spectacular thing that has happened to me in all my life," he said. "People stepped up to help me be successful."

Powell might credit others, but others say Powell's drive always has come from within. Despite the right leg brace and experimental operations to stop the growth of his healthy leg, he became a champion high school wrestler in Fresno and set a record for one of the most dreaded of all gym class drills – the 20-foot rope climb, which he completed in 1.8 seconds. Today, he carries a 6 handicap in golf.

After moving into school administration, he became deputy superintendent, and he was appointed to his current job before running for the office in 2006.

The ordained Baptist minister, who serves on the board of a national anti-bullying group that sprang from the 1999 Columbine High School shootings in Colorado, is so popular he even counts among his friends his contract bargaining nemesis, the former head of the employees' union.

"For a leader to step up to help the budget is phenomenal," said Mike Lepore. "It gives you hope. It gives you the feeling that everything is being done to try to make education work. It's Larry. It really is."

Powell will still earn a six-figure retirement, especially hefty by the standards of California's farming heartland. But because his salary comes out of the district's discretionary budget, for the next three years he'll be able to steer the money he is giving up where he wants: to programs for kindergarten and preschool, the arts and a pet project that steers B and C students into college by teaching them how to take notes and develop strategy skills.

"Our goal has never been to have things," Powell said of himself and his wife, Dot. "We want to give back."