Jefferson Parish schools Superintendent James Meza likely won't stay past June 30

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James Meza, Jefferson Parish’s public schools superintendent for the past 2½ years, said Tuesday he does not expect to sign another long-term contract when his current agreement expires June 30. But Meza said he is not opposed to staying on a few months extra, until his successor is hired.

It was his clearest statement to date about his future, after rumors began surfacing this fall that he might be leaving even before his contract ends. Meza dismissed that notion, saying he plans to stay through to mid-summer of 2014, but he is disinclined to remain much beyond then. "I do not anticipate extending into a multi-year contract, but I have been very passionate about my work here and very committed to what needs to be done," Meza said.

Meza's current contract expires four months before the entire School Board faces re-election. And there has been some speculation, and suggestion from Meza, that the board might keep him on as an interim superintendent beginning July 1, so that his successor is chosen by the board elected in late 2014.

Complicating matters is that the School Board is generally divided. A five-member majority, with backing from Jefferson business leaders, strongly supports Meza. Four members in the minority are often not as enamored of him - though Dale noted that it was Mark Morgan, long-time board member of District I, who had initially proposed to the board that they extend Meza's contract.

An effort to hire a new superintendent to start July 1 would suggest that the board start the process in December or January and reach an agreement in the spring. Board President Larry Dale said members probably will start discussing Meza’s future with the superintendent this week. Meza said he will most likely come to the board in January with a final decision on how he wants to proceed.
Meza came to the job in 2011, after retiring as dean of education at the University of New Orleans. He entered as an interim, after Superintendent Diane Roussel retired. The School Board was so impressed with his reforms, however, that it extended his contract to 2012 then appointed him superintendent in November 2012.

Dale said board members haven't formally spoken with Meza about extending his contract, but that most wouldn't mind him staying longer. "I would love to see an extension of his contract," Dale said. "He's been the architect of bringing a system in a downward spiral to a B system, and he has the vision to bring it to an A system."

In 2011, the School Board set up a superintendent search committee with consultants Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates. The committee was never fully used, however, because Meza was eventually converted from interim to full superintendent.

Dale has said that if need be, the board may re-open the search with the same consultants.