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U.S. NEWS

Head of Philadelphia Schools Leaves Post Early

By KRIS MAHER

Philadelphia's schools chief, Arlene Ackerman, stepped down unexpectedly Monday with three years remaining on her contract, ending an embattled tenure marked by improved graduation rates, a widening budget deficit and clashes with officials.

Ms. Ackerman, who took over as superintendent of the nation's eighth largest school system in 2008, is being bought out of the remaining three years of her contract for \$905,000, nearly half of which came from anonymous private donations. Her annual salary was \$348,000, according to the school district.

Deputy Superintendent Leroy Nunery will succeed Ms. Acker-

man on an interim basis.

In a letter posted on the school district's website, Ms. Ackerman listed recent accomplishments, including improved math and reading test scores and a 29% decline in violent incidents at the city's schools in the past three years.

"I take great pride and satisfaction in knowing that I am leaving the District better than I found it for thousands of young people," the letter said.

Recruited from Teachers College at Columbia University in 2008, Ms. Ackerman arrived at a troubled school district whose elected board had been removed and replaced by a city-state School Reform Commission. She began an ambitious five-year

plan called "Imagine 2014."

Ms. Ackerman won praise from President Barack Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan for her approach to turning around the schools. But state budget cuts necessitated teacher layoffs, angering teachers unions and some parents.

More recently, the district was under investigation in a continuing statewide probe by the Pennsylvania Department of Education into cheating on test scores in the 2009 school year.

In recent months, Ms. Ackerman came under fire for her implementation of costly new programs despite reduced state funding, contributing to a \$650 million schools deficit.

Philadelphia Controller Alan

Butkovitz said many in the city would be critical of paying Ms. Ackerman a large sum when teachers were being laid off. "Many people believe she should not be rewarded for running up that big a deficit," he said.

Robert Nix, a lawyer for Ms. Ackerman, said the \$905,000 covered the next two years on her contract. He said she agreed to take no compensation for the third year, from an extension the school district granted in March, "instead of quibbling over it."

The school district reported that \$405,000 of Ms. Ackerman's payment came from anonymous private contributions. The city's School Reform Commission is expected to approve the payments in a meeting Wednesday.