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Board picks Virginian as education chief

By Leslie Postal, Orlando Sentinel

Gerard Robinson, Virginia's secretary of education, was tapped this morning to be Florida's next education commissioner.

The state Board of Education voted unanimously to hire Robinson, who before his appointment in Virginia worked for a group that advocates for school choices outside traditional public schools.

Robinson, 43, who would succeed Eric Smith, has to negotiate a salary and a start date before accepting the job. He could not be reached this morning but told the board he could not begin work in Tallahassee before Aug. 8.

Gov. Rick Scott's office quickly commended the board's selection, calling Robinson a "nationally recognized leader in school choice."

Robinson's "leadership as an experienced education reformer and advocate for school choice and closing the achievement gap is exactly what Florida needs to reach the next level of education reforms that will benefit both our students and the businesses of our state," Scott said in a statement.

Board member John Padget said Robinson seemed best able to help Florida do more for students who struggle in school, including those who drop out or make it through high school but need remedial work in college.

"I find in this man the ability to relate and to connect the dots to what I perceive to be something very important in Florida," said Padget, adding that he was also impressed by Robinson's "personal life story."

In his application, Robinson wrote that growing up in California, he was a "less-than-stellar high school student who invested most of my time playing football, partying and chasing girls." He went first to community college and then to a university and finally to the Harvard Graduate School of Education, working all the while, he wrote.

"I know firsthand the importance of a quality education for future success," Robinson wrote. "Sadly, I also know firsthand what awaits our children who disconnect from learning prematurely."

Unlike Smith, Robinson has limited experience in public education, teaching only one year in a fifth-grade classroom. He taught college courses for two years but has spent the bulk of his career on education policy, according to his resume. He had focused on what he called the "macro" side of school reform.

Virginia officials said Robinson was asked to apply for the job, and Padget said he included him on his list of candidates he wanted the board's search firm to recruit.

In his Virginia post, Robinson does not wield as much authority as he would in Florida. The secretary of education in Virginia has mostly a policy advisory role with the governor but does not run the Virginia Department of Education.

In Florida, the education commissioner runs the education department and has responsibility for overseeing both public schools and state colleges. The commissioner also serves as the

education leader and point person who works with the governor and state lawmakers.

The state board interviewed five candidates Monday, a finalist pool whittled down from the 26 applicants.

Today, after a brief discussion, the board voted to pick Robinson. All five board members at the meeting in Tampa said Robinson was their top choice.

Board Chairman Kathleen Shanahan had to fly out of state for a family emergency but sent her colleagues an email — read at the meeting — in which she wrote: "My vote is for Gerard Robinson. Florida needs his energy, passion and leadership."

The State Board advertised the job as one that would pay from the "upper \$100,000s to \$200,000s," though that was negotiable based on experience. Smith was earning \$275,000. Robinson makes \$152,000 as a cabinet secretary in Virginia.

Robinson's appointment earned praise from the Florida Chamber of Commerce, which advocates for more school choice, and a key figure in the creation of one of the state's school voucher programs.

His selection "is a step forward in our collective struggle to help the students who are often at the greatest disadvantage," said John Kirtley, founder of a group that administers the state's tax credit scholarship program for low-income students.

Robinson was appointed secretary of education in Virginia last year by Gov. Bob McDonnell, who today praised his efforts to expand spots for students in state colleges and universities and to give public school students more options.

"He led our efforts to expand charter schools, establish college laboratory schools, improve virtual learning programs, and implement a performance pay pilot program," McDonnell said in a statement.

Before becoming secretary in Virginia, Robinson was president of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, a group that advocates for school choice — including charter schools and school vouchers — for low-income black students.

That background meshes with Scott's educational agenda. Board members had said they wanted a commissioner who would be embraced by Scott.

Smith, well regarded among state and national leaders, left when he was unable to establish a relationship with Scott, who took office in January.

Robinson, like Smith, is part of the Chiefs for Change group, created by former Gov. Jeb Bush's educational foundation. The group of state leaders "share a zeal for education reform."

Shortly after his nomination to the Virginia post in January, 2010, Robinson told the Associated Press that while he is viewed as a "charter school guy," he is a supporter of public education, including traditional public schools.

But in his job at the Black Alliance, Robinson was a strong advocate for what he called a "new kind of educational freedom in America."