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Gerard Robinson is Florida's new commissioner of education

By Marlene Sokol and Jeffrey S. Solochek, Times Staff Writers

Florida's new education commissioner is a school choice advocate.

TAMPA - By his own account, Gerard Robinson the teenager was not a stellar student.

He spent most of his time playing football, partying and chasing girls. His first stop after high school was El Camino, a two-year college in Torrance, Calif.

A quarter-century later, he's a high-profile advocate for parents' rights to choose the best school settings for their children.

On Tuesday morning, he became Florida's commissioner of education.

Robinson, 44, replaces Eric Smith, who resigned in March when it became apparent that he and Gov. Rick Scott had different objectives.

Scott made it clear he favored Robinson, Virginia's education secretary, from a field of five who interviewed with the state's Board of Education on Monday afternoon in Tampa.

Members Roberto Martinez and Akshay Desai said they got calls from the governor asking that they vote for Robinson and indicating he was reaching out to the entire board.

Tuesday morning, without discussing other candidates, the board endorsed Robinson unanimously. The whole thing took less than six minutes. That included reading an e-mail from chairwoman Kathleen Shanahan, who missed the meeting but wrote, "Florida needs his energy, passion and leadership."

Less than an hour later, photos were released of Robinson and Scott together in Tallahassee, along with this statement from the governor:

"Gerard brings to Florida a long and remarkable set of accomplishments in innovation and proven results that will help us continue putting children first, improving our schools and ensuring Florida has the best-educated workforce."

Robinson did not return phone messages and an e-mail seeking comment Tuesday.

As commissioner, he will implement sweeping legislation that replaces the teacher tenure system with performance-based pay. He will oversee 67 school districts and a statewide network of community colleges at a time of continued economic hardship.

His credentials as listed in his application show a career in which advocacy for conservative education causes such as vouchers and charter schools is interwoven with time in the classroom and as an administrator.

After graduating from Howard University in 1991, he taught fifth grade for a year at Marcus Garvey School in the heart of in Los Angeles. From there he went to work for a Republican senator in California, drafting charter school

legislation.

Soon after he moved to the East Coast, where he divided his time between teaching, academic research, working for state and federal lawmakers, and earning a master's in education at Harvard University. He said he passed oral and written exams for his doctorate at the University of Virginia, but never completed his dissertation.

His publications and speeches focus largely on urban and minority students, choice options and charter schools.

In a 2004 essay for the libertarian Cato Institute, Robinson compared the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* case - which banned public school segregation - with a 2002 Supreme Court decision that upheld the use of vouchers in Cleveland.

"President George W. Bush said the voucher ruling was 'just as historic' as the Brown decision," Robinson wrote. "I agree."

Robinson was working as president of the nonprofit Black Alliance for Educational Options in 2010 when Virginia Gov. Robert F. McDonnell, a Republican, tapped him as education secretary.

While there, Robinson helped push through passage of the Virginia Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2011, which has the goal of issuing an additional 100,000 degrees over the next 15 years. McDonnell praised him for improving education and opportunity for Virginia's schoolchildren.

As Virginia's education secretary, Robinson had a small staff with a handful of direct reports. As Florida's education commissioner he'll oversee a staff of hundreds of employees.

In Virginia, leaders of the teachers union found him cordial but took issue with his emphasis on school choice. They were taken aback when he told a state House committee, early on, that he considered it his job to create wider choices for parents.

"His job was to make sure that the 94 percent of children who attend public school have the highest quality of education," said Robley Jones, director of government relations for the Virginia Education Association.

When Robinson tried to convince minority lawmakers of the benefits of vouchers, Jones said, "it was perceived by many that the race card was overplayed. And it backfired."

Interviewed on Monday by the Florida board, Robinson acknowledged he is a big believer in educational options. "I would like to partner with the public and private sector to do great things," he said.

But he also said he doesn't believe choice can cure all ills, or that money can necessarily fix failing schools.

He favors Florida's move to revamp teacher evaluations and use them in pay and employment decisions. But he wants to hear more from teachers about how they think the evaluations should look.

And he said he wouldn't be the kind of leader who moves into Florida with his own agenda.

"There is nothing new under the sun," he said Monday. "I am not arriving with new ideas but trying to identify what works and what doesn't work.

In nominating him, board member John R. Padget made note of the two years Robinson spent as a student in a community college before earning his other degrees.

Padget said such a broad perspective is important, as Florida's schools must serve those students in danger of dropping out, or graduating from high school without adequate preparation for college or the work force.

"I find in this man the ability to relate and connect the dots to what I perceive to be something very important for Florida," he said.

In his application letter, Robinson hearkened back to his childhood.

"As the first in my family to earn three college degrees while often working full-time," he wrote, "I know firsthand the

importance of a quality education for future success. Sadly, I also know firsthand what awaits our children who disconnect from learning prematurely, youth who drop out of school permanently, and working-age adults who remain unprepared for full participation in our market economy.

"So education for me is not a job; it is a calling."

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Gerard Robinson


Age: 44

Educated: El Camino College, Howard University, Harvard University (Ed.M.) Started, but did not complete, Ph.D. at University of Virginia

Most recent job: secretary of education, Commonwealth of Virginia, 18 months.

Personal: Married, three children.

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