

Commentary

Programs cut to enrich superintendent

By Jack Foreman

Centinela Valley Secondary Teachers Association read Centinela Valley school board President Maritza Molina's response to last week's Daily Breeze article with great interest. We can say unequivocally that we agree with her on many points. Centinela Valley has improved dramatically over the past six years; and we share her concern that the publicity over the superintendent's pay package is causing a distraction in our community.

Nevertheless, the credit for Centinela Valley improvements is shared by the entire staff, not only by the superintendent. We have worked very hard as a community for years (often in a crisis atmosphere) to turn our district around.

Superintendent Fernandez deserves credit for improvements that have taken place under his watch; but that in no way justifies the off-the-charts level of compensation that he has received. Mr. Fernandez is the highest paid superintendent in the state of California. (And possibly in the entire United States!) Centinela Valley is not a hedge fund. And no school board is supposed to reward a superintendent as though he were a shrewd manager who had an especially successful run. The monies that flow into Centinela Valley are public funds to pay for the education of mostly low-income students from a community that has been greatly challenged by the Great Recession.

CVSTA members are outraged that during the most difficult times of our lives, while most of us were simply trying to maintain our professional and personal lives, Mr. Fernandez enriched himself by convincing our board to approve one of the most crafty and opaque contracts that we have ever seen.

Let us be clear: While Centinela Valley staff were being laid off by the dozens, and we were sacrificing and watching programs be cut to the bone, our superintendent was leading a life of opulence — all paid for out of Centinela Valley coffers.

CVSTA also wants to point out that Mr. Fernandez managed to bring Centinela Valley back from insolvency by cutting many good programs including SoCalRoc. Prior to the 2009-10 school year, Centinela Valley sent more students to SoCal-Roc than any district. Hundreds of our students boarded buses daily to take vocational education courses there; courses that were particularly valuable to our students because they provide job training. Many students from very modest backgrounds managed to graduate with cosmetology licenses, or qualified to work in the medical or computer fields.

Mr. Fernandez cut SoCalRoc so that the \$1.2 million that went there would instead go directly into the CV general fund. In 2012 he similarly cut our adult school from 24 to three teachers so that hundreds of thousands of dollars more would flow into the general fund. In the fall of 2012, CVSTA members campaigned tirelessly for both Proposition 30 and Measure CL (the parcel tax.) We stood on corners with signs and we spoke with hundreds of voters with the singular message of "Save our schools!" Also, CVSTA contributed well over \$2,000 of member political action funds to the Measure CL campaign.

After our great success in November 2012, we approached district leaders and asked that our CV Adult School be restored (as Mr. Fernandez had publicly promised) and we made it clear that the time had come to raise our notoriously low medical benefits cap. (Some members pay more than a thousand dollars per pay period to insure their families.) Curiously, we were told that the district was still in a financial crisis and that no parcel tax money would reach Centinela Valley for another year; and that no money was available to restore the CV Adult School either.

In December 2013, CVSTA leadership learned that just weeks after the parcel tax passed in December

2012 (when we were being told that the District was still broke) Mr. Fernandez purchased a home for \$910,000 at 2 percent interest for 40 years, financed by the district. We also learned that shortly thereafter, he submitted for reimbursement of \$215,000 for five years of CalSTRS retirement credit, another outrageous perk permitted by his contract.

In other words, the signs that our members held asking voters to vote for Measure CL should have said, "Please vote to help our superintendent buy a million- dollar home!"

CVSTA is calling on our board to take immediate steps to rectify this unacceptable situation. And the board needs to accept responsibility for approving a contract so generous that Centinela Valley has become the subject of a statewide scandal. *Jack Foreman is president of the Centinela Valley Secondary Teachers Association.*