

TELACU picks Centinela Valley school board winners, and wins big:

Editorial

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The Centinela Valley Union High School District, already the poster child for [outlandish compensation for a superintendent](#), offers a stark example of an unhealthy — especially for taxpayers — relationship among construction companies, bond underwriters, campaign money and elected officials.

It's a big, round-robin game of "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" that leaves parents and students on the sidelines.

TELACU, a community development corporation that bills itself as the fifth largest Latino-owned business in California, [has spent tens of thousands of dollars to elect school board members](#) in the district since 2008 and has been rewarded with contracts to manage the construction projects financed by two successful bond measures totaling nearly \$200 million.

In 2009, TELACU, which stands for The East Los Angeles Community Union, donated \$28,000 to Citizens for Better Schools, a political action committee that spent \$55,000 to back three candidates in the school board election: incumbent Rocio Pizano and challengers Hugo Rojas and Maritza Molina.

Rojas and Molina, then a 23-year-old recent college graduate and now the school board president, beat incumbents Rudy Salas and Frank Talavera — both of whom had opposed putting the 2008 bond measure on the ballot.

In December, a month after the election, the new board unanimously approved [Superintendent Jose Fernandez's preposterously generous contract](#), which enabled him to rake in more \$663,000 tax dollars in total compensation last year. Then the board put a \$98 million bond measure on the ballot and district voters passed it in 2010.

TELACU got the construction contract, of course — a good return on its investment in the school board election.

It's not unusual for construction companies to spend money backing bond measures from which they hope to profit, but it's less common for them to back particular school board candidates in a big way.

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But TELACU continued to do so. It gave at least \$10,000 for the 2011 school board campaign to Citizens for Better Schools, which spent \$82,000 to support of challengers Lorena Gonzalez and Ugo Felizzola II, who ran against incumbents Sandra Suarez and Gloria Ramos. Gonzalez ousted Suarez, but Ramos retained her seat.

Ironically, TELACU was for Suarez and Ramos before it was against them. TELACU officials, including President and CEO David Lizarrago, donated to their campaigns early on. But Suarez later spoke out publicly against the 2010 bond measure, losing TELACU's blessing and her school board seat.

Citizens for Better Schools — don't you love the names of political action committees? — received \$25,000 that year from investment firm Piper Jaffray of Minneapolis.

Piper Jaffray's website says, "In 2012, we managed 347 bond issues for cities, counties and local

authorities nationwide, providing \$13.12 billion in financing.”

(In 2010, Piper Jaffray contributed \$25,000 and TELACU \$20,000 to an unsuccessful campaign to pass bond Measure CL in Claremont Unified School District.)

So here’s how this looks: A big construction company spends big bucks to elect the school board members it wants; the board gives an obscenely generous contract to the superintendent, who along with the board gives lucrative contracts to the construction company.

“I think it’s outrageous they do this in low-income communities,” said Councilman Larry Rudolph of Lawndale, one of the communities served by Centinela Valley. “What are we getting for it? I don’t see anything except for these big fancy buildings. I don’t see how they are going to make the kids any smarter.”

School board President Molina, [in her op-ed responding to the Daily Breeze's reporting on Superintendent Jose Fernandez's exorbitant pay](#), wrote that “this construction program has changed the face of the district and provided students with state-of-the-art facilities.” The teachers union president, [in response to Molina's op-ed](#), cited educational programs that were cut at the same time Fernandez’s compensation was shooting skyward.

It’s legitimate to ask: Is Centinela Valley school district being run for the benefit of students, or for the superintendent, the school board and a construction company?