

Paid leave for Centinela Valley superintendent just a start: Editorial

Thursday, April 10, 2014

DailyBreeze.com

The Daily Breeze (<http://www.dailybreeze.com>)

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Putting the exorbitantly compensated head of the tiny Centinela Valley School District on paid leave is the equivalent of a finger wagging, as if the superintendent had done something mildly naughty.

What Superintendent Jose Fernandez did at the district was obscene and immoral.

But part of the reason there's been so little action in response is that four of the five members who imposed this punishment were in on the scam — they approved his preposterous contract. And that's not the only questionable behavior they have been engaged in.

There have been excessive [spending on contracts with attorneys](#) (10 times more than nearby districts), [possible illegal stipends](#) to board members (the Los Angeles County Board of Education has ordered a halt to the pay) and a political system dependent on donations from a powerful [construction company that's reaping millions](#) (TELACU bankrolled Centinela Valley school board campaigns).

The district needs to be cleaned up.

But as with many small districts and municipalities, too few residents pay attention. That's true not only in the South Bay but across a region that consistently logs low-voter turnout. Let's not blame the voters, however.

These public agencies are often the only ones policing themselves. Think of the city of Bell and the Central Basin Water District. These agencies often fall below the radar in serve high-poverty communities where education levels are low. So opportunists milk the taxpayers. That was certainly the case for residents of Bell, where five former City Council members on Wednesday pleaded no contest to misappropriating public funds, and on Thursday the former assistant city manager was sentenced to 11 years and 8 months.

Centinela Valley school board serves largely low-income Latino and black families, many of them worried about paying their own bills much less those of the district.

While these families focused on making ends meet, Fernandez raked in \$663,000 last year, far above the nearly \$390,000 compensation package his colleague John Deasy, head of the huge Los Angeles Unified School District, earned. That's more than the president of the United States makes. The clauses that allowed for this massive compensation were tucked into a contract approved in 2009.

As an added insult, Fernandez is likely to spend his paid leave in his lovely home in affluent Ladera Heights. He can relax, not too far from the waves lapping up on the coast, without much worry about his two previous bankruptcies because of a \$910,000 home loan from the district with a 2 percent interest rate

— unheard even for those with top credit scores.

What's most disturbing about Centinela is that while plenty of folks have been benefiting from the district's largess, one group in particular seems to be getting only modest, if any, benefits — students.

About one in four still drop out and test scores are the lowest in the county. So not only were taxpayers taken for a ride but there was a direct effect on the very people that the agency was set up to nurture, educate and create a future for.

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