

D.A.'s investigation into Centinela Valley school district extensive

By Rebecca Kimitch, *The Daily Breeze*
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The Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office is investigating a wide range of issues at Centinela Valley Union High School District, including the superintendent's exceptionally high salary, the district's use of bond funds and a contract with a construction management firm, according to the DA's records request obtained by this news organization.

The request, obtained under state open records laws, reveals that the district attorney's Public Integrity Division has requested more than three dozen documents from Centinela since March, shortly after it was revealed Superintendent Jose Fernandez [earned a salary last year of more than \\$650,000](#).

Investigators could be looking for signs of collusion between Fernandez and the school board, said Kathay Feng, executive director of California Common Cause, a nonprofit that aims to bring greater accountability and transparency to government.

"If you look at the pattern that has happened in many of the cities that they have investigated in Southern California in recent years, it is the same: low voter participation, a low level of public scrutiny and a high degree of collusion between the elected officials and appointed staff," Feng said.

"What happens is the electeds get the things they want — the awarding of a contract to a friend, the hiring of friends or relatives — and the city manager or other high-level hire gets what they want: high compensation.

"It's just I'll scratch your back, you scratch my back."

Still, Tracy Westen, former vice president and CEO of the Center for Governmental Studies, a now-closed nonprofit that studied local governments, said it is difficult to say what the DA is looking for, given the breadth of the investigation. However, he added, opening an investigation at all is a threshold the DA's Office doesn't take lightly.

"They have determined there is something worth looking into. They generally don't open an investigation unless they have reasonable cause to do it," Westen said. "... They're always saying they are underfunded and overworked, so they wouldn't ask for all those documents otherwise."

The DA's Office and Centinela interim Superintendent Bob Cox would not comment on the investigation.

In addition to the DA, the [FBI](#) and the Los Angeles County Office of Education also have opened investigations into the school district.

As part of its investigation, the FBI has interviewed current and former district officials and requested employee payroll records.

Last month the district hired Risk Control Strategies, an investigation and crisis management firm, to conduct an internal investigation.

As a result of preliminary findings, the [school board placed Fernandez on unpaid](#) leave in May, a month after [placing him on paid leave](#).

The school board is building a case to fire him, possibly as soon as at its next meeting.

If other public corruption cases are any indication, it could be years for the DA's investigation to conclude, Feng said.

"They are going through documents, interviewing witnesses. The quicker cases seem to happen because there are a few individuals who understand what is going on and are willing to serve as witnesses," she said. "The longer cases typically happen over the course of many years — either additional information needs to be gathered, sometimes through undercover operations or through subpoenas. The evidence is harder to come by."

Among the documents the District Attorney's Office has requested:

- Fernandez's contract, personnel file, calendar and/or date book, entire payout history and Form 700s, which are statements of economic interest required of certain public employees.
- School board members' compensation and payout history and Form 700s.
- Contracts and payments made to TELACU, the district's construction management firm.
- Records related to the district's selection of law firms.
- Audits of the district's 2008 and 2010 bond measures and related records.
- Records related to the district's \$910,000 home loan to Fernandez.
- Annual budget .
- Proposals from Quality Environmental Inc., an abatement contractor, and LPA Inc., an architectural firm.
- The district's policies on travel and use of district credit cards.

URL:

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