

## Centinela Valley school board target of recall campaign

By Rob Kuznia, *The Daily Breeze*  
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#### Two educators want four who OK'd superintendent's lucrative contract ousted

The four Centinela Valley school board members who voted for the notoriously generous employment contract of fired Superintendent Jose Fernandez are facing the prospect of getting fired themselves.

That's because a husband-and-wife pair of educators from Hawthorne has launched a campaign to recall Gloria Ramos, Maritza Molina, Rocio Pizano and school board President Hugo Rojas.

All voted in late 2009 for the employment contract that [enabled Fernandez to amass more than \\$663,000 in total compensation last year](#), as well as take out a low-interest, \$910,000 loan to purchase a home in Ladera Heights.

Kevin Schaaf said he and his wife, Phuong Nguyen — an elementary school teacher in Lawndale — are embarking on the effort because they believe the board is ultimately responsible for Fernandez's extraordinary pay.

At Tuesday night's school board meeting, in accordance with California election law, Schaaf served the board members with a notice of intention to recall.

"I was initially outraged at Mr. Fernandez, but I then realized he was only part of the problem," said Schaaf, who also has taught in the Lawndale elementary district but now attends UCLA full time in pursuit of an education doctorate. "The people who have the responsibility are the board members. They are the boss in the situation. They need to be the ones who are saying, 'No, that's not a reasonable amount of money to pay you.' "

None of the board members returned calls for comment Thursday.

Fernandez — whose compensation is under criminal investigation — took out the loan at a time when dozens of teachers at the district composed of four high schools in Hawthorne and Lawndale were being laid off due to budget cuts.

The county has since concluded that Fernandez [owes the district up to \\$256,000](#) in overpayments.

The county also dinged the [school board for accepting excessive pay](#). In April, the Los Angeles County Office of Education ordered the district to halt the \$800-a-month stipends given to board members for car allowances and cell phone use. This boosted their monthly salaries to \$1,040 -- or five times the amount to which they are legally entitled. The district quickly complied.

The last recall attempt in Los Angeles County occurred three years ago in the city of Bell, home to an infamous scandal over misappropriation of public funds. In that 2011 special election, voters

overwhelmingly ousted the mayor and two council members, who'd each been illegally collecting about \$100,000 a year for their part-time positions. The mayor and council had cleared the way for City Manager Robert Rizzo to boost his annual salary to nearly \$800,000.

Rizzo and five council members were all convicted for misappropriating funds. Rizzo is serving time in prison; the others have been sentenced.

But if history is a guide, the effort in Centinela Valley could be an uphill climb.

To even make the ballot, the petitioners must collect signatures from 15 percent of the registered voters in the district, a sizable swath that includes Lawndale, Hawthorne, Lennox and some unincorporated areas. In Centinela, that amounts to about 8,700 signatures.

Within the past 16 years, two attempts to oust school board members in Centinela both failed to make the ballot for lack of signatures.

The first was in 1998, when a coalition of local politicians, teachers, business owners and parents canvassed neighborhoods in hopes of ousting then-board member Mario Chiappe, who was at the center of a complex dispute involving the firing of a superintendent.

The second occurred in 2004, when the teachers union spearheaded a drive to dump Angelina Moller, who had been painted as an ineffective leader who had contributed to poor test scores and low teacher morale.

Sandra Suarez, a former Centinela board member who co-chaired the effort to jettison Chiappe, said she is skeptical the current effort will be successful.

"I commend them for doing it — I encourage and commend them, but it's an awful long shot," she said.

Suarez said the biggest challenge in 1998 was finding volunteers to scour the streets in a district where voter turnout hovers around 10 percent.

"You can't even get voters to vote — now you're going to ask them to walk the streets?" she said.

Suarez added that in the case of Moller, the teachers union was "even paying people to go out there, and they still couldn't" collect enough signatures.

That said, the current scandal in Centinela Valley is arguably less convoluted than the two previous ones, which were born of provincial battles. By contrast, the uproar over Fernandez's pay has attracted national media attention.

Schaaf and Nguyen are in the beginning stages of the process. After Tuesday's meeting, they sent the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder's Office the affidavit stating that they have notified the board in public.

If county election officials approve the wording and formatting of the petition, Schaaf and Nguyen will have 160 days from that date to collect their signatures.

It won't happen in time for the November election: The deadline for that elapsed in July. But the district could hold a special election.

Meanwhile, the last contested election in Centinela occurred in November 2011, when Ramos was re-elected to her post and Lorena Gonzalez — the only current board member who isn't a part of the recall attempt — ousted Suarez.

In November 2013, Rojas, Molina and Pizano ran unopposed, thereby winning re-election to their four-year posts.

Pizano has been largely silent ever since revelations about Fernandez's pay were [first reported](#) by this news organization in early February. Then-board President Molina initially rallied to Fernandez's defense, detailing his successes in a [letter to the editor](#) of the Daily Breeze. Not long after, the board stripped her of the honorary title and gave it to Rojas, who has been contrite, and has publicly called Fernandez "greedy."

"I know my colleagues personally, that we would not knowingly give that high a salary," he said in late February.

But Schaaf said ignorance is no excuse.

"I don't mean anything against them as people," he said. "Sometimes people make mistakes and have to take responsibility. I would have been more impressed if any of them had offered to resign."

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