

## EDUCATION

# Inland Empire districts stand up for parents

By Melissa Melendez

California students and parents have had it rough during the first four years of this decade. Not only were children locked away at home, condemned to “learn” behind a screen long after experts determined that youngsters faced only nominal risks from COVID-19, but parents were also stonewalled, sued and threatened when they questioned their children’s curricula. Consequently, millions of California schoolchildren suffered years of deferred learning and stunted social skills that they may never recover.

Instead of addressing these concerns, state leaders doubled down on orienting our public schools away from students and their parents, who should be deciding what their children learn. Woke school administrators demonstrated they are content to hand our children over to extremist ideologues who clearly believe public education exists to carry out radical indoctrination, not to serve the best interests of our children.

In the fall of last year, California Attorney General Rob Bonta filed suit against Chino Valley Unified School District for mandating that parents be informed if their child identifies as transgender or “gender non-conforming.” Evident in the attorney general’s heated rhetoric about “forced outing” and “expos[ing] our most vulnerable students” is that state leaders think parents are villains, and that government is the primary protector for children. A court ruling ultimately led the district to weaken its policy, generalizing parental notification to include any changes to a student’s record. Yet pro-child transition advocates say it’s still discriminatory.

In the latest segment of this saga, Murrieta Valley School District explicitly defied state orders by reaffirming a parental notification policy similar to that in Chino. If the voices heard at their April meeting were any indication, the board is acting in line with the wishes of the parents who



ANJALI SHARIF-PAUL — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Chino Valley Unified School District board President Sonja Shaw is seen during a June public meeting. Shaw is among a group of school board members and allies who are proposing and enacting policies requiring parents to be told if their child identifies as transgender.

showed up in droves to support these protections. Similar lawsuits are ongoing throughout the state, including in nearby Temecula where a parental notification policy similar to that in Chino Valley remains in place.

The state’s ongoing persecution of these school boards expose the astounding level of disorder in our officials’ thoughts on education. First, Bonta and his acolytes seem content to discount the legitimate interests of the overwhelming number of parents who wish to raise their children according to their values and judgments. It is parents who know what is best for their children and how to help them when with difficult questions. Yet, when the state will not allow parents to be informed about serious issues that arise at school, they are deprived of an opportunity to counsel their children through sensitive situations.

Second, Bonta and others seem to think that government agents such as school administrators are well-intentioned and trustworthy figures when it comes to guiding children in these life-altering decisions. Even more shocking, they

make it clear that the greatest risk to children who may be struggling with gender issues are parents! Speaking about the Chino Valley mandate that parents should merely be informed, Bonta’s own deputy said, “we can’t gamble for safety of students.” Yet who bestowed on school bureaucrats and politicians the prudence to determine what is best for any particular child? And what makes their claim to be the protectors of children greater than a parent’s natural prerogative?

Implicit in these criticisms is that simply expressing reservations about gender transitioning for children and adolescents is dangerous, even if such concern is for one’s own child. The truth is that Bonta and others’ opposition to parental notification of transgender identification has little to do with protecting children and everything to do with using public schools as a carte blanche space to indoctrinate children and further their radical cultural agenda.

Youngsters are merely their pawns in this sick game, as Bonta himself admitted when he framed his lawsuit against the Chino Valley School Dis-

trict as part of his cultural war, saying, “the LGBTQ+ community is under attack, and transgender and gender-nonconforming students are on the front lines.”

The reality is that parents are on the front lines as defense against this attack on their rights to guide and teach their children and protect them from those who would irreversibly mutilate them. The attorney general and school bureaucrats are not trustworthy or protective figures if their priority is to hide life-altering surgeries from parents.

School districts in Chino Valley, Murrieta Valley, Temecula and throughout the state are doing the right thing by restoring parents’ natural right to be informed of life-altering developments regarding their children. Other school districts across the state need to follow suit before politicians can further harm California families.

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## CALIFORNIA

# Financial fraud in community colleges

By Jon Coupal and Kim Rich

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed California’s fiscal mismanagement in countless ways, most spectacularly in the payment of more than \$30 billion — some estimates put the total as high as \$55 billion — in fraudulent unemployment benefits. But another category of fraud could quickly balloon to numbers nearly that high unless more is done to stop it.

We’re referring to the enrollment of vast numbers of “bots” in California’s community college classes, and their apparent ease in obtaining financial aid even though they are fake students.

One of the co-authors of this column uncovered this startling development as a professor of criminal justice at Pierce College in Woodland Hills, part of the Los Angeles Community College District. In September 2021, the Los Angeles Times reported that fraudulent applications to community colleges had surged to at least 65,000 in just a few months. It may be much worse now.

In April, CalMatters reported that an official in the state chancellor’s office told the publication that in January of this year, 25% of applicants to the state community college system were suspected to be fraudulent. The number of fake students applying “spiked like crazy” in the last year, according to an official of the Kern Community College District.

CalMatters made a Public Records Act request for specific data on fraudulent applications to the California Community College Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO), which oversees 116 individual schools. But the data that was made available was too generalized to be useful. Instead, CalMatters received combined data for the entire system from September 2021 to January 2024. It showed that “the colleges received roughly 900,000 fraudulent college applications and gave fraudsters more than \$5 million in federal aid, as well as nearly \$1.5 million in state and local aid.”

It is likely that the true dimensions of the fraud will significantly exceed those numbers because, as the CalMatters’ investigation found, compliance with the Community College system’s reporting requirements is uneven at best.

In September 2021, the CCCCCO mandated monthly reporting on fraud tracking. But a year after the required start date, some colleges had not yet complied, while others regularly missed reporting deadlines.

Admittedly, this is a challenging problem to solve. Enrollment has been declining in the state’s community colleges, and funding is tied to enrollment. That could give school administrators a financial incentive to look the other way and not investigate fraudulent enrollments too aggressively.

Another problem stems from the switch to remote learning, which has persisted past the pandemic. Even if it were the teachers’ responsibility to ensure that their students aren’t fake, it is difficult for faculty members to verify that students are real when they only appear as empty rectangles on a Zoom screen.

For teachers, there is a downside to raising the issue of student bots. If they identify so many bots that their own classes are canceled, their paychecks are put at risk. In one district, this has happened on more than one occasion.

But in light of this problem, it shouldn’t be too much to ask for public agencies, including community colleges, to verify the identity of applicants before releasing financial aid or other benefits to them. California taxpayers can’t afford to support legions of fraudsters.

The Legislature should order an audit of the community college application system, including financial aid applications.

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## HOMELESSNESS

# Spending hasn’t helped homeless

By Christopher Calton

Over the past decade, homelessness in California has been rising at alarming rates. California already topped the national list in 2014 when it had a homeless population of 114,000, but according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s 2023 Homelessness Assessment Report count, that number has grown to more than 180,000 — nearly a 60% increase — and an astonishing two-thirds of these individuals are entirely unsheltered. In fact, with a total unsheltered population of 123,423, California is shamefully only about 10,000 shy of the other 49 states combined.

Yet California has spent a record \$24 billion fighting homelessness over the past five years, according to a state audit published last month. In other words, the homeless population and homelessness spending have grown in tandem. How is this even possible?

The sad reality is that the current homelessness policy, known as Housing First, virtually guarantees an ever-balancing homelessness budget, regardless of how effective it is in reducing the homeless population. This is because the measure of success under Housing First is not independent self-sufficiency, but in homeless persons becoming de facto wards of the state.

In 2013, the federal government adopted Housing First as its approach to homelessness, and California followed in 2016. This means that both state and federal homelessness grants are reserved exclusively for providers who comply with Housing First principles.



SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA NEWS GROUP

A dog sits chained to a fence at a homeless encampment in Ontario.

The Housing First philosophy contends that the most effective way to address homelessness is to offer people immediate, no-strings-attached housing. Service providers forfeit their grants if they make housing conditional on, say, sobriety or participation in treatment programs. In theory, supportive services are voluntary, but in practice they are almost non-existent.

Instead, California’s approach to Housing First entails little more than warehousing people in permanent-supportive housing (PSH) units. PSH residents are not classified as “homeless” for official counts, but they remain dependent on taxpayer support, which is paid out of the homelessness budget.

We did not always treat permanent dependency as the best-case scenario for homeless individuals. When the Clinton administration first established the continuum of care system for homelessness services in 1994, the Department

of Housing and Urban Development explicitly stated that “the goal of the comprehensive homeless service system is to ensure that homeless individuals and families move from homelessness to self-sufficiency, housing, and independent living.”

When Sam Tsemberis, a clinical psychologist, conducted the first Housing First experiment in New York City, he altered the measure of success to “housing stability,” achieved not through self-sufficiency, but through perpetual subsidies. Tsemberis found that 88% of his clients remained stably housed, compared to 47% of patients in treatment-oriented programs. However, Tsemberis worked exclusively with people suffering from severe mental illnesses — those who would have been institutionalized in an earlier era — so it is reasonable that perpetually subsidized housing may have been the best possible outcome for this particular subset of the

homeless population.

But should permanent dependency be the goal for all homeless persons? In FY 2022-2023, California spent \$116 million on permanent-supportive housing for homeless youth. A policy that functionally treats homeless and at-risk children as lost causes is not only financially unsustainable, it’s downright inhumane.

A significant portion of homeless individuals suffer not from incurable mental illness, but from untreated substance-use disorder, and the overdose mortality rate of PSH residents is disturbingly high. But studies of crack-addicted homeless persons in drug-abstinent housing, work therapy and day treatment programs found that upon completion, roughly half of the participants remained sober, housed and stably employed. Yes, “housing stability” was lower than Housing First experiments, but independent self-sufficiency is an unquestionably better outcome for those capable of achieving it.

We can accept that there will always be people who require permanent assistance, but state policy should not treat this assumption as universal. Even if we could end homelessness by permanently warehousing people, we should strive to do better.

But after following the Housing First playbook for nearly a decade, the results are clear: the more money we spend on this strategy, the faster the homelessness crisis grows.

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