



## LAUSD board president faces felony charges in campaign contribution case



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The president of the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education was charged with multiple felonies and misdemeanors for allegedly inflating his campaign illegally.



Wednesday, September 13, 2017

LOS ANGELES (KABC) -- The president of the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education was charged with multiple felonies and misdemeanors for allegedly inflating his campaign illegally.

Refugio "Ref" Rodriguez, 46, and his cousin, Elizabeth Melendrez, 45, were each charged with one felony count of conspiracy to commit assumed name contribution and 25 misdemeanor counts of assumed name contribution, according to the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office.

Rodriguez also faces one felony count each of perjury and procuring and offering a false or forged instrument.

Rodriguez, who became president of the school board this summer, raised more than \$50,000 during the first campaign reporting period that ended on Dec. 31, 2014, the D.A.'s office said. Rodriguez had only just announced he was running for the school board one month prior.

In total, 25 donors, most of whom were family and friends, were allegedly paid back \$24,250.

"It's surprising to us that this case has come to the point of a criminal prosecution of such a small amount of money so long ago in a local race," Melendrez's attorney Mark Werksman said.

Werksman, along with Rodriguez's attorney Daniel Nixon, said the case against their clients is not worthy of the charges.

"As I understand it, candidates fund their own campaigns often. I think it's a question of simply the details and nuances of how that takes place," Nixon said.

The names of the donors were listed on a campaign finance report that was allegedly City Ethics Commission, which received a whistleblower complaint about Rodriguez's fundraising activities in March 2015.

The Ethics Commission found that over a 22-day period in December 2014, nearly half of the campaign contributions were allegedly fraudulent because Rodriguez and Melendrez reimbursed them.

If convicted on the felony counts, Rodriguez faces a possible maximum sentence of four years and four months in custody, while Melendrez faces up to three years in custody.

The case remains under investigation by the District Attorney's Bureau of Investigation.

Rodriguez and Melendrez were scheduled to be arraigned on Wednesday, but their arraignment was postponed until Oct. 24. Both remain free on their own recognizance.

Rodriguez released the following statement regarding the case:

*This decision by the District Attorney comes after attempts by my legal team and me to resolve these issues with the Los Angeles Ethics Commission for over two years.*

*As the product of an immigrant family, nobody has more respect for the integrity of the American justice system than I do. I have cooperated with authorities and hope these issues will be resolved expeditiously and fairly.*

*Above all, my commitment to the students, teachers, parents and families of Los*

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above my commitment to the students, teachers, parents and families of Los Angeles remains unwavering. I have always been determined to put students first and to bring a "Kids First" agenda to L.A. Unified. I was just a kid from the community and developed a passion for education - and ran as a first-time candidate - in order to help build a better future for other kids like me. That passion has always fueled me, and it always will.

Nixon said his client Rodriguez plans to return to work on the school board Thursday morning.

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