

Rescuers fear rains will wash away victims' remains with 870 still missing in...



Paradise narrowed its main road by two lanes despite warnings of gridlock durin...



Mueller might soon bring charges that even Trump die-hards can't trivialize



Election fraud scheme on L.A.'s skid row got homeless to sign fake names for...



The Car homes I standing

EDUCATION LOCAL

## Charges against school board president stun L.A.'s education world

By HOWARD BLUME, ANNA M. PHILLIPS and SONALI KOHLI SEP 14, 2017 | 4:15 PM



L.A. Unified school board president Ref Rodriguez appeared in state court Wednesday afternoon to face charges stemming from his 2015 run for office. He was released on a recognizance bond. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

Charter school advocates in Los Angeles had been having a great year. With millions of dollars at their disposal, they had won their first majority on the school board and installed a pro-charter board president, Ref Rodriguez.

They had ambitious plans for the future and they had the leadership of Rodriguez, a figure in the national education reform movement.

Then, on Wednesday, the Los Angeles County district attorney's office [charged Rodriguez with three felonies](#) in a 14-page criminal complaint.

No one — not district or charter school leaders or his fellow board members — said they knew it was coming before the news broke.

Rodriguez had been aware for two years he was under investigation for suspect donations made to his school board campaign, he said on Wednesday. And for two years, his colleagues in the world of education had been kept in the dark.

Prosecutors accused Rodriguez of political money laundering by giving \$24,250 to his own campaign, while illegally reporting that the donations had come from more than two dozen other people.

His three felony counts are conspiracy to commit a crime, perjury and procuring and offering a false or forged instrument, and he faces 25 misdemeanor charges, one for each donor he allegedly reimbursed. His cousin and campaign volunteer Elizabeth Tinajero Melendrez, 45, also faces criminal charges.

L.A. Unified officials and board members reacted to the news with shock. They insisted that they had no inkling of his troubles back in July, when a majority of the seven-member board voted to make him president. And the district attorney said the investigation is ongoing.



A proposed STEM school causes the first divide among the new group of school board members

AUG 28, 2017 | 5:00 AM

Communities, commonly known as PUC Schools. He had gone straight out of charter schools onto the board, the first board president chosen by the body's new charter-friendly majority.

Well-liked and careful to avoid heated rhetoric in the charter school debate, Rodriguez was a logical choice for the job. But with criminal charges hanging over him, it could become increasingly uncomfortable for him — and the other

board members — to have him as a public face and spokesman for the nation's second-largest school system.

"Today's news about our Board President, Dr. Ref Rodriguez — a longtime educator and advocate for kids — is unsettling," board member Nick Melvoin said in a statement when the news broke. "The serious allegations are not connected to the work of the Board or L.A. Unified; our focus today, as it is every day, has been on our students and school communities."

L.A. Unified General Counsel David Holmquist said Rodriguez has no legal obligation to step down as president, although he could choose to do so.

"To be accused of a crime does not preclude from being able to serve as a board member. He's the sitting board member, the board president. We're going to continue to treat him as such," Holmquist said. "And he'll retain all his rights with respect to that, unless and until he decides to do something."

If Rodriguez vacates his leadership position, but remains on the board, the current majority

### LATEST EDUCATION

Kayser plans to end run for his former L.A. school board seat  
NOV 19, 2018



Betsy DeVos moves to strengthen the rights of the accused in campus sexual misconduct cases  
NOV 16, 2018



UC regents approve budget to enroll 2,500 more California students without a tuition hike  
NOV 15, 2018



UCLA professor wants to see data on whether UC illegally uses race in admissions decisions  
NOV 15, 2018



Californians want more funding for public higher education, survey shows  
NOV 14, 2018



Monica Garcia, who has served as board president before.

Within the district, however, there was rampant speculation about how long Rodriguez can hold on.

Board member Scott Schmerelson, who did not vote to make Rodriguez board president, expressed sympathy for Rodriguez but declined to commit to keeping him in his current position.

"You know, I do not really know," he said Thursday. "It hurts because he's a fellow board member. I was in shock, absolute shock. I just hope everything works out."

Gonez, who did vote to make Rodriguez president, declined to comment on his future in the job.

"Unfortunately, the board member doesn't have time to make a statement today," said a member of Gonez's staff.

Board member George McKenna also declined to discuss the situation, including a query about whether Rodriguez should have stood for board president and possibly alerted his colleagues that he was under investigation.

"Those are great questions," McKenna said. "And I have to say: No comment."

In the scheme outlined in the criminal complaint, Rodriguez allegedly cashed out an investment worth \$26,000 and gave the money to Melendrez with instructions to deposit it in an account under his parents' names. The complaint says that Rodriguez's mother then wrote checks to her son's friends and relatives, reimbursing them for donations to his campaign.

When Rodriguez submitted his first fundraising statement, it showed that he had raised about \$51,000. Prosecutors say 25 of those donations had actually been reimbursed, and that of the money raised, \$24,250 came from the candidate himself.

One potential issue for Rodriguez on the board could be whether he cast past improper votes on items for which he should have stepped aside. If district legal staff had known of the allegations, they could have weighed, for example, whether he should vote on matters related to PUC Schools. That's because the criminal charges indicate that PUC employees made illegal campaign contributions funded by Rodriguez. And the other defendant in the case, Melendrez, has worked for PUC Schools since 2004 and was a PUC administrator at the time of the alleged crimes, according to campaign records.

Holmquist said the district's legal staff would look at this and all other possible issues.

PUC already is the subject of a years-long and confidential investigation by the L.A. Unified inspector general. One subject of the probe has been conflicts of interest related to food-service contracts, some of which were entered into while Rodriguez was a senior PUC official. PUC's current leadership has expressed frustration for some time at what seems to them, a never-ending inquiry intent on finding something wrong. Rodriguez's current troubles might only extend the process.

News of the charges against Rodriguez has been especially troubling for charter school advocates and others who looked to him to address not only some of the obstacles they believe stand in the way of charter school growth but the looming financial problems that threaten to hobble the school district.

"I had thought maybe with a new and strong board majority that isn't beholden to the interests from within the district that they might be in a much stronger position" to address district budget concerns, said Eric Premack, founder of the Charter Schools Development Center, an advocacy group.

"I kind of looked to Ref to, with or without regard to his charter reputation, to have the strength to do that," Premack said. "I hope they find some way to resolve this such that he can continue to serve but if not...I fear it might lead to a fractured board again."

The California Charter Schools Assn., whose political affiliate spent heavily to get Rodriguez elected, issued a statement Wednesday that was cautiously supportive of him.

"We appreciate that Ref has spent his career working to improve educational opportunity for thousands of Los Angeles students," Jed Wallace, chief executive of the association, said in a statement. "We fully expect proceedings related to this matter to be thorough, efficient and fair."

**Times staff writer David Zahniser contributed to this story.**

[howard.blume@latimes.com](mailto:howard.blume@latimes.com) | **Twitter:** @howardblume

[anna.phillips@latimes.com](mailto:anna.phillips@latimes.com) | **Twitter:** @annamphillips

[sonali.kohli@latimes.com](mailto:sonali.kohli@latimes.com) | **Twitter:** @Sonali\_Kohli

## ALSO

[Motel 6 says its employees will no longer call immigration agents on its guests](#)

[Three arrested as protesters gather at UC Berkeley for talk by conservative speaker Ben Shapiro](#)

[U.S. Army Corps of Engineers says Whittier Narrows Dam is unsafe and could trigger catastrophic flooding](#)



Howard Blume

CONTACT   

Howard Blume covers education for the Los Angeles Times. He's won the top investigative reporting prize from the L.A. Press Club and print Journalist of the Year from the L.A. Society of Professional Journalists chapter. He co-hosts "Deadline L.A." on KPFF, which the press club named best radio public affairs show in 2010. He teaches tap dancing and has two senior daughters.



Anna M. Phillips

CONTACT [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [Email](#)

Anna M. Phillips covers K-12 education in Los Angeles. Before joining the Los Angeles Times, she wrote about crime and courts for the Tampa Bay Times. She previously covered the New York City public school system for the New York Times and Chalkbeat New York. She grew up in a suburb of Philadelphia and graduated from Columbia University.



Sonali Kohli

CONTACT [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [Email](#)

Sonali Kohli is a reporter covering education for the Los Angeles Times. A product of Southern California, she grew up in Diamond Bar and graduated from UCLA. She worked as a metro reporter for the Orange County Register and as a reporter covering education and diversity for Quartz before joining The Times in 2015.

BE THE FIRST TO COMMENT

Los Angeles Times



NOV 19, 2018



## Tijuana protest

Tijuana residents protest over Central American migrants caravan.



Tijuana protest  
Nov 19, 2018



Nancy Pelosi:  
"Tomorrow will be a  
new day in America"  
Nov 06, 2018

### LATEST NEWS

California fires: Risk of Malibu mudslides will be high through the winter

4m



California fires live updates: Camp fire death toll rises to 81; number of missing jumps to 870

4m



Dramatic NASA images show destruction of California fires from space

13m



Roberts criticizes Trump for 'Obama judge' asylum comment

16m



Letting U.S. troops open fire on migrants would make the stupid decision to deploy them even worse

19m



Sign up for our newsletters  
Subscribe for unlimited access



About/Contact  
Archives  
Classifieds  
Terms  
Site map  
Advertising

Corrections  
Privacy policy  
L.A. Times careers  
Find a job  
Shop

Copyright © 2018, Los Angeles Times