

The Miramonte scandal and the crisis of public education in California

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Miramonte Elementary, the largest public elementary school in the Los Angeles area and the second largest in the state of California, has been rocked in recent weeks by a scandal involving alleged inappropriate acts against students committed by teachers.

Mark Berndt, a teacher at the school for more than 30 years, has been charged with 23 counts of committing lewd acts. Another Miramonte teacher, Martin Springer, was subsequently arrested after the parents of two former students accused him of engaging in inappropriate physical contact with the children. One of the two students has since recanted her testimony.

One of the two students was transferred out of Berndt's classroom to Springer's after her father had complained to school principal Arturo Sandoval about inappropriate photos he had found of his daughter with Berndt. Allegations that Springer was fondling his daughter followed soon after.

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has now voted unanimously to fire Springer although he has not yet been found guilty of any crime.

Police have now arrested a third Miramonte teacher for bringing children to Berndt's classroom to be sexually abused. The Los Angeles Sheriff's department alleges that the teacher in question would be visited during the day by Berndt, and send a few of her students over to his class.

The charges against Berndt are serious ones, and photos have allegedly turned up strengthening the case against him. Parents have every right to be extremely concerned.

The panic-stricken (or opportunist) LAUSD responded to the growing crisis by placing all Miramonte staff on indefinite leave, sending in outside teachers as replacements and closing the school for two days in the interim. The district acted without

consulting parents, teachers or union officials beforehand.

The United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) held a press conference to protest the possible sacking of all the teachers, but has indicated its full agreement with the sequestering maneuver in which the teachers are expected to be grilled by Los Angeles police in an attempt to uncover malfeasance. Since the initial protest, the UTLA has made no further statements regarding Miramonte.

It isn't certain at this point whether the former Miramonte teachers will ever be allowed back to the school. The district itself has yet to make its intentions public. Upon returning to class on Thursday, however, students were asked to write goodbye letters to their teachers, indicating that they won't be returning to the classroom for the remainder of the school year.

The district claims that the mass replacement effort was meant to restore confidence among parents who would otherwise transfer their children to other locations. Ironically, the lowest attendance numbers at Miramonte occurred February 9, the day the school reopened. This was also the day that parents and students protested against the district's replacement maneuver. The total attendance rate that day was 67 percent. As of this writing, only 22 families have inquired about transferring their children out of the school, with half of those following up on their initial inquiry.

A petition has been signed by over 400 Miramonte parents calling for the return of the expelled teachers. The teachers have all been relocated to Augustus Hawkins High School which is still under construction. The petition also demanded that school and police officials stop continually pulling children out of class for questioning, which has apparently been taking place

since the school reopened.

There are indications that various establishment figures are hoping the Miramonte scandal will lead to further discoveries of child abuse within public schools, creating a Catholic Church-type scandal and opening up new possibilities to lay waste to public education. Mainstream media outlets, for their part, have declared this to be virtually inevitable.

A recent *Christian Science Monitor* headline reads: “Miramonte sex abuse: Schools facing Catholic Church-like wave of scandal?” Another CSM article comments, “Noting that sex-abuse incidents have also recently hit universities, including Penn State and Syracuse, activists and analysts are suggesting that schools could be facing a test similar to the one endured by the Roman Catholic Church, when sexual abuse allegations were no longer able to be swept under the rug.”

Similarly, an editorial in the *Los Angeles Daily News* brazenly reads, “LAUSD reform—Miramonte scandal is opportunity to change the school system.” The article argues that the process for firing and prosecuting accused sex offenders on public school campuses should be significantly accelerated. If innocent teachers happen to be caught up in the child molestation dragnet, then the newspaper argues they will simply have to be regarded as collateral damage.

While allegations of child abuse must be taken with the utmost seriousness, teachers, parents and school works must always be aware of the context in which attempts are being made to whip up mass hysteria over the events at Miramonte. It is no coincidence that this is taking place in a period of massive defunding and attacks on public education at the behest of the highest levels of the Obama Administration.

Hardly a week goes by without a new attempt to penalize teachers and shut down public schools under the guise of education reform.

The Obama administration itself announced the creation of Race to the Top Program, which offered a paltry sum of money to schools undertaking “reforms” meant to streamline the firing process for so-called under-performing teachers.

LAUSD followed soon after with its Public School Choice Initiative, which opened up existing public schools to outside charter operators. Last January Superintendent John Deasy announced that all newly constructed public schools in the district would be run

by private charter companies or by the UTLA’s Pilot School program, which allows union officials to helm these schools and hire and fire their own members.

Last year, the Parent Trigger initiative scored its first victory in the city of Compton. The Parent Trigger law allows major changes, including mass firings and privatization, to take place at a given school in which half the parents sign a petition indicating their dissatisfaction. These efforts were derailed, however, when many of the parents claimed their signatures were gathered under false pretenses.

The mainstream media has also predictably gotten into the act. The *Los Angeles Times* released a publicly available database of teacher performance evaluations in 2010. Roberto Ruelas, a former teacher at Miramonte Elementary, was so distraught over the grade he received, that he took his own life. More recently, the *Times* has lent its support to efforts to repeal pension benefits to any teachers charged with a crime.

For his part, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, a former UTLA organizer and this year’s chair of the Democratic National Convention, has given his full support to the Miramonte expulsions and the actions that followed, which more and more take on the character of a witch-hunt.



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