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San Diego Unified revokes then reinstates **benefits for** Gompers Prep founders

After 15 years of success, why now?

Author **Eric Bartl** **Publish Date** Jan. 18, 2021







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Cecil Steppe: "Why is our superintendent revoking these rights? Why now?"

Chollas View Neighborhood News n Tuesday, January 12, parents and teachers from Gompers Preparatory Academy pleaded with the San Diego Unified school board to restore on-loan agreements the district made with four of their founding staff members 15 years ago.

Director Vincent Riveroll, executive assistant Paz Garcia, assistant director Lisa Maples and Welcome Center lead Judith Franceschi were notified a year in advance their on-loan status would be phased out July 1, 2021. They would have to choose between keeping their jobs at the Chollas View charter school or keeping their employment with the district.

Deidre Walsh, director of the district's Office of Charter Schools, stated in an October 27, 2020 memo, "As members represented by the district's labor organizations, the four on-loan employees receive district salaries and benefits, as well as other protections and benefits offered by the collective bargaining agreements. In contrast, all other Gompers employees receive Gompers salary and benefits... Ending on-loan agreements ensures all Gompers workers are treated equitably."



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The January 12 board meeting was the first to include remote public comment by video. Fifteen public commenters were unanimous in asking the board to reinstate the on-loan agreements and make them good for life. The consensus was these founders are vital to the school's well-being.



Trustee Kevin Beiser: "I remember when Gompers was not a charter school...The students were in control...They would throw their chairs and desks out the window."

Parents told stories of their children graduating from Gompers and becoming the first in their family to go to college. In tears, one parent said she wanted her fifth grader to go to Gompers and wanted it to be the same school her older child benefitted from. (The school has grades 6-12.)

Gompers chairman Cecil Steppe told the story of a violent failing school Riveroll was asked to turn around in 2004. He said, "We either had to correct the behavior and outcomes at Gompers or the state would have to take over...That's when you as a board asked [the four founders] to enter into on-loan agreements to do this important work [of turning Gompers into a charter] but retain their benefits. They honored your request and did so with the assurance of indefinite return rights. After 15 years of success and after four previous superintendents honored this agreement, why is our superintendent revoking these rights? Why now?"

After public comment, board trustee Richard Barrera motioned to delay the item to a future board meeting and questioned why these staff need to remain employed by the district.

Trustee Sharon Whitehurst-Payne, who represents Gompers in District E, countered, "If we did [make that commitment] then like it or not we should honor that...for the tenure of these four employees."

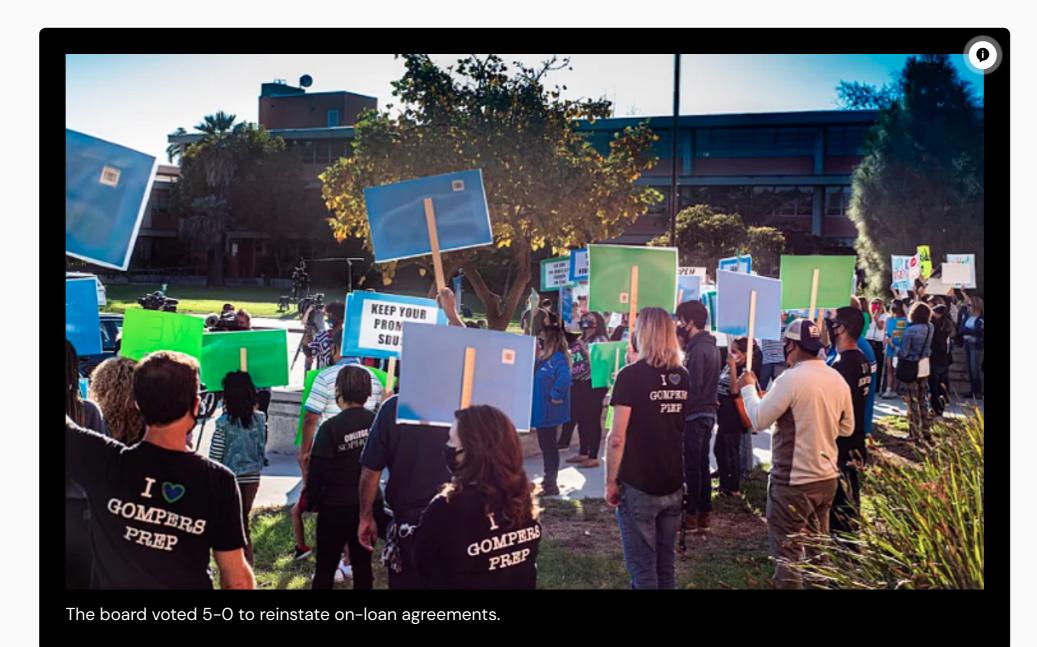


"It didn't matter to the union leaders that 86% of teachers wanted it."

Trustee Kevin Beiser agreed with her. He said, "I remember when [Gompers] was not a charter school...The students were in control...They would throw their chairs and desks out the window. You couldn't hire a teacher. They would quit before 10 am their first day."

Trustee Sabrina Bazzo, new to the board, said, "I feel like there's a lot of attention being paid to just four staff members out of a huge district and we have so many other important issues... that we're spending a huge amount of time on what is only affecting...those four people..." Then she stated she wanted to spend more time figuring out why Gompers "can't support" their employees.

Beiser responded, "These pioneers had the courage to go to this school and turn it around...Let's make an exception for four people who've made a phenomenal impact on the lives of thousands of children in San Diego."



Barrera changed his mind and decided to approve the lifetime on-loan agreements. But before the vote was taken his tone changed to that of a parent scolding a child as he said, "I hope the Gompers board has heard loudly and clearly that as this board moves forward to honor the ability of four of your employees to continue to be employees of this district with full union representation and union negotiated benefits that we are not unaware that you have been found by the Public Employee Relations Board to have committed unfair labor practices...As this board moves forward to do the right thing for your community...[we have] an expectation that you will do the right thing by your own employees." The board voted 5-0 to reinstate on-loan agreements for as long as the four work at Gompers.

Gompers visual arts teacher Mary Davis says, "When Barrera said there was an unfair labor practices judgment, he left out the fact that the case was never heard (the school lost on procedural grounds) and is now up for appeal."





Parallel to the controversy over on-loan agreements has been controversy and division at Gompers over the recent introduction of a union to the school, as Joe Deegan reported for the *Reader* last August.

Davis says, "Barrera knew there was a union at my school before I knew. I found out there was a union from a letter Barrera put in my mailbox. What does that signify?"

She continues, "100% of support staff, 86% of teachers and 824 parents and community members signed a petition to support reinstating the on-loan agreements. Numerous staff sent letters to the Gompers Teachers Association saying, 'With 86% of union members wanting to support the founders would you please send a letter of support on our behalf?' They refused.

"It didn't matter to the union leaders that 86% of teachers wanted it. I respect someone's personal decision not to sign a petition but when your members as a supermajority are asking you and [as the union] you refuse, that's questionable.

"This moment could have been a phenomenal unifying event bringing everybody together. If the union had sent a letter to the school board supporting our founders it could have healed and brought back trust. But the union was formed by disgruntled teachers, some of whom have already left. That's what I say about the belief system. You don't leave if you really believe in Gomper's students first mission."

Chemistry teacher Dr. Kristie Chiscano says, "This is what you call a heavy lifting job. You take a class two grade levels below and you have to get them college ready. You are a parent, a teacher, a supervisor and a counselor. It's not for everybody. We're in this marathon and we're not done yet. There's so much more the school wants to do and the community wants to see happen."





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