OUR VIEW

Goodbye, Garcia Hello, New Day

Let the replacement game begin. Shocking everyone from supporters to detractors to colleagues, Clark County School District Superintendent Carlos Garcia resigned from the job after nearly five years, leaving a $212,000-a-year salary and a bursting-at-the-seams school district (the nation's fifth largest) to become vice president of urban markets at McGraw-Hill, an educational services company that provides textbooks to school districts throughout the state, including Clark County.

"I've loved every minute of this job, I have the greatest staff, teachers and the best school board in the country," Garcia told the school board last Thursday in announcing his resignation. "I don't have a single complaint."

Unfortunately, his detractors—and there are many—can't say the same. Granted, Garcia, who spent nearly 25 years in California's public education system as a teacher, principal and administrator before coming to the CCSD, had an onerous job in righting this valley's educational ship, coming here at a time when the district experienced both unparalleled growth and unenviable consternation.

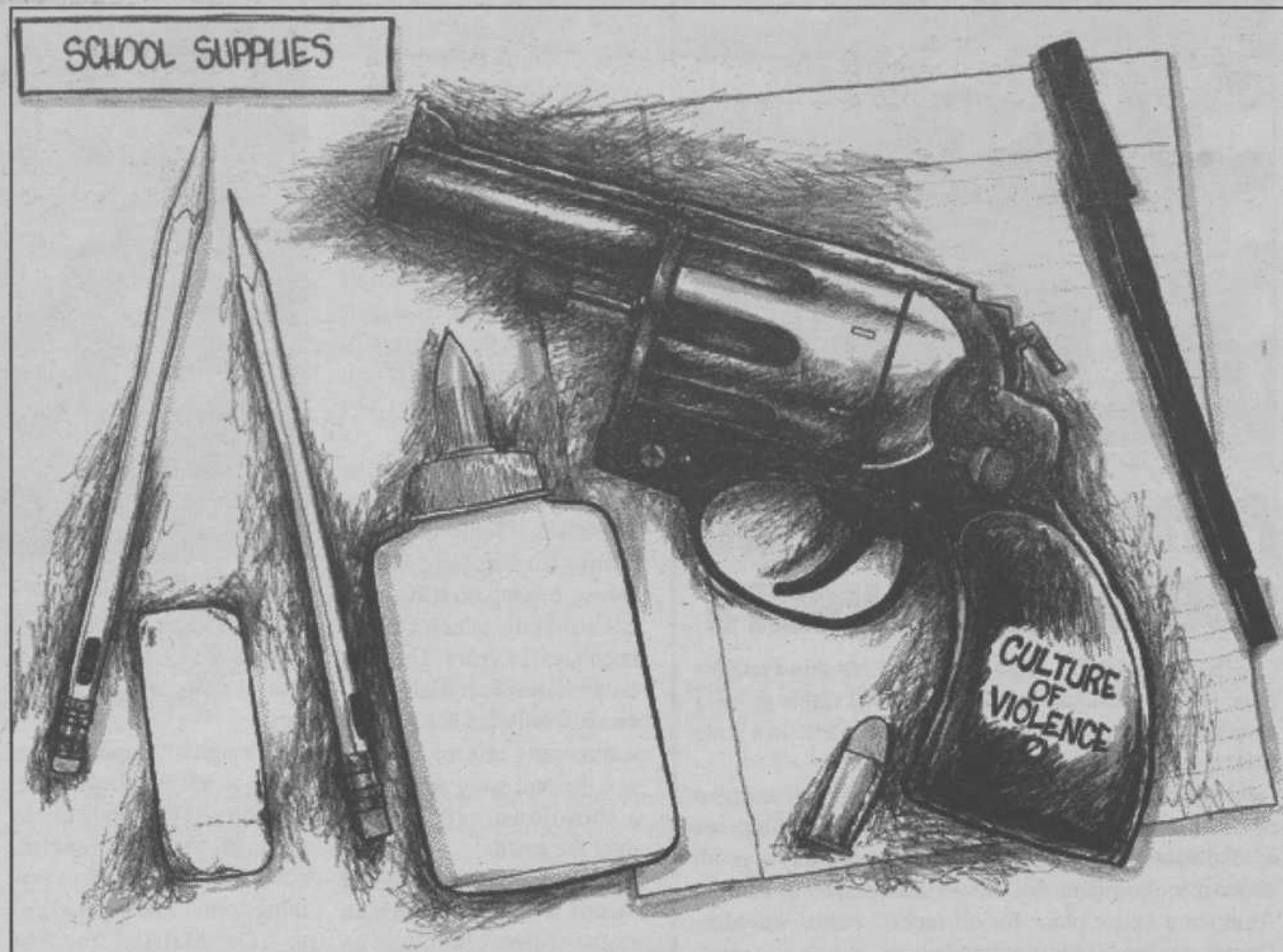
Even with 1998's voter-approved multibillion-dollar school construction and modernization bond, the district couldn't erect schools fast enough—dozens of portable trailers had to hauled in to serve as classroms. Nor could the district hire teachers fast enough—despite $2,000 signing bonuses for newcomers—or lift standardized scores high enough, even with a four-year headstart on meeting the rigid standards of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation (the 1997 Nevada Education Reform Act was essentially its precursor). While Garcia deserves credit for mobilizing the state's 17 school superintendents to support InVest, a program calling for, among other things, funding all-day kindergarten, he gets black marks for regionalizing the district—creating five area superintendents which, in effect, creates five superintendents and five layers of bureaucracy.

In fact, every positive thing Garcia accomplished can probably be matched by something negative. Plus: an improved graduation rate and significant increase in students taking honors courses and college entrance exams. Minus: minimal improvement in standardized test scores. Plus: better, though still lagging, performance by minority and special education students on state exams. Minus: a growing number of schools landing on the needs-improvement lists. Plus: a 50 percent increase over four years in the percentage of students enrolling in algebra by the eighth grade. Minus: failing to implement full-day kindergarten in all of the valley's elementary schools.

His overall education legacy can be described as mediocre, although when factoring in a potentially devastating blunder during the first part of his tenure (using the n-word on a radio program; he says he was using it to denounce racism), his grade could easily slip from a'"C" to "D." Some detractors in West Las Vegas might downgrade that to an "F," seeing Garcia as the main obstacle that prevented them from getting a high school in the area.

With Garcia gone as of mid-July, a new day will dawn in the school district. The school board spent $100,000 to find him and will likely spend as much employing an executive search firm to find his successor. And the new superintendent, whoever you are, you'd better a be a quick study. Yes, per-pupil funding is below the national average. So you'd better learn the political and business terrain quick if you're going to get needed funding. You'll also need to be culturally sensitive because the CCSD is a majority-minority district. You might want to prioritize issues—what's more imporant, higher teacher pay or all-day kindergarten? If both are vital, refer to the tip on politics and business. And we haven't even mentioned dealing with cantankerous school board members, angry parents, defeatist teachers or unruly students. It's a bedeviling job to be sure, but if you leave it better off than you inherited it, you'll already be ahead of Carlos Garcia.

POINT OF VIEW



Legal extortion: Robbing the 'hood

By Dora LaGrande
Special to Sentinel-Voice

ON THE RECORD

By Dora LaGrande

The term "fringe economy" is used to describe financial world practices that vigilantly protect the monetary interests of the rich while neglecting those of the poor. It is an economy with two sets of rules: One for the rich, and another set of "non-rules" for the poor. It is a biased practice that prosecutes Wall Street brokers and investors for complex financial crimes, which most people don't understand, while allowing other companies, such as mainstream banks, credit card issuers and housing providers to engage in what I call "legal extortion" against the poor and uninformed.

This fringe economy is dominated by a handful of well-financed national and multinational corporations with strong ties to mainstream financial institutions. Institutions like Wells Fargo, CitiGroup, MasterCard, Ford Motor Company and American Express, just to name a few.

According to the Federal Reserve Board, roughly 12 million (one-fourth of low income families) are unbanked, which means they have no formal relationship with a bank, savings institution, credit union or other mainstream financial institution, thus leaving them ripe for picking when it comes to predatory lending practices.

While the fringe economy focuses on the poor, it also effects a growing number of functionally poor households. Households with above average income but there are few or no assets and high debt. The functionally poor may frequently do financially disastrous things like this: Homeowners use their homes, drawing out equity regularly, like using an ATM machine, to finance credit card debts and other purchases. In addition to homeowners at or near poverty-level, some middle class consumers with tarnished credit who have high interest rate credit cards or finance their purchases through time-deferred payments are also included in this example. In this sense, a great majority of the middle-income are economically closer to the traditional poor than they are to the traditional middle class.

How does one get trapped in this sector? What are some of the components? How can you protect yourself from predatory lending practices?

Focusing on credit card abuse, overdraft protection, home refinancing and homeownership, as I promised earlier in this series, these are some things readers should beware of and be aware about regarding financial institution predators.

In 2004, consumer credit card debt reached an all-time national high of $1.59 trillion, which translates into $14,500 per household. Statistics show that 12 percent of credit card holders use 80 percent or more of their credit card limit, (roughly 20 percent of all U.S. credit cards are maxed out) and 10 percent have balances greater than $10,000. Credit card companies engage in predatory lending practices by using exploding interest rates, hidden balance transfer fees and excessive late fees. Companies have even gone so far as to identify their ideal customer as those who no longer pay off their balances, but instead grow increasingly indebted to the credit card company by making inadequate monthly payments.

Some of the proposed solutions to credit card abuses are:

• Mandate that credit card issuers disclose to all cardholders how long it would take to pay off their debt and state how much interest and principal consumers would owe if only minimum payments are made.

• Limit penalty rates to no more than 5 percent above the original annual percentage rate.

• Limit the extension of credit to a line equal to no higher than 20 percent of the

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