

Keeping Ramon onboard

Questions raised about PUSD contract with former Board member Ramon Miramontes

By [Peter Dreier](#) 01/30/2014

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Until the past week, many Pasadena Board of Education members did not realize that former Board member Ramon Miramontes had wrangled a \$54,000 contract with the Pasadena Unified School District. The board is scheduled to discuss the matter in executive session before its meeting tonight.

Miramontes ended his four-year term on the school board last May.

Sources say that PUSD Superintendent Jon Gundry talked with Miramontes last year about helping the district with two initiatives. PUSD has no rule requiring a hiatus before a former board member can do business with the district, but the Miramontes contract has stirred some board members to consider adopting one.

A contract dated Aug. 1 reveals that Miramontes' consulting firm, Zocalo Strategic Group (ZSG), is seeking \$54,000 to help the district develop a "virtual" English Learner Student (ELS) academy, as well as create program to recruit high school students from China to attend PUSD. On Nov. 1, ZSG sent PUSD an invoice for \$8,500 for work it allegedly did in September and October. At a billing rate of \$100 an hour, this translates into 85 hours of work, but the invoice does not itemize how many hours Miramontes worked, when he worked, or what he did. Gundry had not informed the full school board about either initiative.

Board members and community residents are wondering why Gundry would give a contract to a former school board member whose divisive behavior made the PUSD board a constant battleground, who alienated many people in the community, and who is known as a bully whose actions hurt the school district and its students, including Latino students whom Miramontes claims to speak for.

Miramontes has some experience with online education. He has been on the board of the Los Angeles Online High School, chartered by the Antelope Valley Unified School District. The high school ranked among the worst-performing schools in the state, with a 25 percent graduation rate (12 percent for Latino students). The school's API score dropped 52 points last year, meeting none of its annual measurable objectives.

At its Nov. 18, 2013 meeting, the school's three-member board elected Miramontes its president. It also voted to give a consulting contract to John Pappalardo, who also happens to be PUSD's chief financial officer.

Miramontes was a disruptive figure on the PUSD board, often harassing administrators, staff, principals and teachers. He used his position to promote his own political ambitions while failing to support policies to strengthen the school district. In 2009, he threatened to withhold his support for Measure CC, the parcel tax designed to increase funding for PUSD, if his school board colleagues voted to give the popular then-Superintendent Edwin Diaz a strong, positive evaluation.

While on the school board, Miramontes served as a front man for Parent Revolution, an organization funded by corporate foundations to replace public schools with private charter schools.

Miramontes is known for what one elected official called his "opportunistic" political dealings. In 2011, Miramontes recruited and supported Sean Baggett, a Tea Party-leaning Republican, to run against incumbent Board member Tom Selinske. Miramontes continued to support Baggett — including speaking on his behalf at meetings — even after the Pasadena Weekly revealed that Baggett had lied about his educational credentials and employment history and had an arrest record for drunken driving, reckless driving and public urination. Selinske defeated Baggett.

It isn't clear how Miramontes had time to engage in all these activities in Pasadena since he held three or four jobs — simultaneously — while also serving on the school board.

While on the PUSD board, Miramontes taught business courses at LA Southwest College but, according to informed sources, in 2012 he was put on administrative leave after getting into a physical confrontation with another college instructor. Although it is not known how long he was on leave or how it was resolved, Miramontes is no longer teaching at Southwest College. His name does not appear in its current on-line list of courses.

At the same time, he served as the executive director of the Southeast Cities School Coalition, a nonprofit group created by George Cole, a former Bell City Council member and influence-peddler who was one of several officials convicted last March on multiple felony counts as part of the corruption scandals in that troubled city. Local Bell-area watchdogs believed that Cole's motive in creating the organization was to eventually carve out a separate school district comprised of the Southeast cities (including Bell, Vernon, Cudahy, Huntington Park, Maywood, and South Gate), which would have control over tens of millions of public dollars. Miramontes served as the group's executive director from 2009 until sometime last year when the organization dissolved.

In May 2011, Miramontes added to his resume another job — executive director of the Bassett Education Foundation — although it is not clear from its Web site how many hours a week Miramontes works, or what he does, for the organization.

Observers first noticed Miramontes' ZSG consulting firm in 2012, during a hotly contested race for the Pasadena-based Assembly seat being vacated by Anthony Portantino due to term limits. Miramontes went on a shopping spree to find a candidate who would pay him to work on a campaign. After former Pasadena City Council member Chris Holden, who won the race for

Portantino's seat, spurned his offer, Miramontes briefly served as the campaign manager for another candidate, South Pasadena Mayor Michael Cacciotti. Soon, however, Miramontes jumped ship, joining Victoria Rusnak's well-funded campaign. Media reports indicated that the Rusnak campaign paid Miramontes (then still on the Pasadena school board) about \$30,000 in her unsuccessful race.

School board members and other community residents have witnessed Miramontes' anger management problems and been subject to his abusive and threatening phone calls. In 2011, Miramontes got into a shouting match with mild-mannered Pasadena Mayor Bill Bogaard at a public event, where Bogaard — then 73 years old — warned Miramontes not to push him, according to onlookers.

Despite his ambitions to be a local power broker, "Ramon doesn't have a following, but he thinks he does," observed one local elected official. Local political and school district observers note that Miramontes had no more than 10 people who regularly attended school board meetings and other events to support him. Last year some of them showed up at Board member Elizabeth Pomeroy's front lawn after she and Miramontes had a disagreement.

Miramontes has made no secret of his political ambitions. But his trajectory was stalled when PUSD voters changed the election system from at-large to districts, leaving Miramontes nowhere to run, since he lives in the same district as his former board ally Kim Kenne.

Some observers have suggested that without his full-time job at LA Southwest College and his part-time job at the Southeast Cities School Coalition, Miramontes may be in a financial bind, which may explain his effort to secure a consulting contract with PUSD.

The larger questions about Miramontes' contract are whether the board will scuttle the arrangement, ask Gundry why he kept the contract (and the two initiatives) secret, and change the rules to avoid what appears to be insider dealing.

Peter Dreier teaches politics at Occidental College and serves on the board of the Pasadena Educational Foundation. In 2009, Dreier endorsed Miramontes for school board and donated \$100 to his campaign. These views are his own.