

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

SCHOOL YEAR STARTS WITH CHALLENGES AND PROMISE

With Hilary havoc behind them, schools across San Diego County are now open and ready for learning.

The unusual start aside, I wonder if this academic year will mark a return to our old, pre-pandemic “normal” or if the gaps it created are insurmountable. I hear stories from restorative justice practitioners who work for the National Conflict Resolution Center in schools across the county — and I’m grateful we’re in place, making a difference for kids.

A troubling remnant from the pandemic is “chronic absenteeism.” It’s when a student misses 18 days of classes or more during the school year. Oceanside Unified saw an 18 percent increase in chronic absenteeism last year. That’s about 3,000 of the district’s students in kindergarten through 12th grade across 23 campuses, according to a KPBS report.

The district was working to address the problem even before school started on Aug. 15, with counselors, support staff and a social worker making house calls and delivering backpacks full of school supplies.

Absenteeism has a snowball effect: Students who miss school may worry about falling behind their classmates and find it easier to stay home, exacerbating their learning losses.

The pandemic years, with their patchwork of remote learning opportunities, had the same effect on academic progress. In January, McKinsey & Company published findings from the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report, which showed that some two decades of progress in math and reading have been wiped out.

Average math scores for fourth- and eighth-graders in 2022 fell by 5 and 8 points, respectively, compared with 2019 levels; average reading scores fell by 3 points. One point on the NAEP scale represents roughly three weeks of a school year, meaning students in 2022 were — on average — about 15 to 24 weeks behind in math and nine weeks behind in reading compared with 2019. That’s equivalent to a quarter or half a school year.

NAEP scores also revealed widening gaps among students. While learning losses were widespread, low performers were disproportionately hurt compared with high performers.

Social emotional learning also suffered, with setbacks in all grades. SEL is foundational to achieving self-awareness, managing emotions, and building positive relationships. NCRC’s restorative team has seen the effects: depression, anxiety and distress among students; reduced engagement

and interest in learning; fractured social connections.

The prospects for a return to normal are dimmed by a big factor working against kids: teacher shortages across more than 40 states. There are 280,000 fewer teachers now than before the pandemic, according to NBC News. Shortages seem to be worse in schools that serve high concentrations of students of color and students in poverty.

The reasons are well documented — among them, low pay, burnout, and a lack of respect for the profession. There is a credible fear of violence: In 2023 so far, there have been 184 incidents involving guns on campuses, with 23 causing injuries or death. In school districts around the country, treasured books are being banned and curricula scrubbed.

Administrators are dealing with the shortfalls however they can, relying on long-term substitutes, relaxing qualifications, or hiring teachers from overseas. Some districts are using financial incentives and even shortened work weeks to attract teachers.

Voice of San Diego reporter Jakob McWhinney said last week that the number of teachers working in the San Diego Unified School District has declined only slightly, while the number of paraeducators (who work alongside teachers)

has grown. McWhinney also noted that class sizes have decreased, by about 8 percent districtwide.

Reading all of this, you may conclude that my outlook is grim. But there is great work happening in San Diego County school districts that makes me hopeful. In an effort to close the pandemic gap — or narrow it, at least — they are taking steps to create a culture of learning, which starts with the establishment of trusting relationships between all members of the school community.

One of NCRC’s restorative practitioners, Mikiel Toure, has said that now is the perfect time to begin this work. He recommends that the first week or two of school be devoted to community building. After the summer hiatus, teachers are always eager to get started with academics, but the time spent pays dividends throughout the school year. The pandemic shone a light on the stubborn inequities in our educational systems. It should strengthen our resolve to invest in our kids — all of them — creating a new and better normal.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC’s programming, visit ncrconline.com

ARABO APPOINTED TO ANOTHER STATE BOARD

BY LUKE HAROLD

DEL MAR

Mark Arabo, a longtime presence in the county’s business community, has been appointed to the board of directors at the 22nd District Agricultural Association, which runs the Del Mar Fairgrounds, the governor announced Aug. 11.

It’s the second time Arabo, president and CEO of Refined Management, has been appointed to a board by Gov. Gavin Newsom since a judge ordered Arabo to pay back \$248,000 in unjustified bonus and expense payments to a nonprofit he worked for. Neither appointment required confirmation by the state Senate.

Arabo, a Democrat who is well known in San Diego County’s Chaldean community, said in a statement that he is “deeply honored” to join the board.

According to the governor’s website, Arabo has been president and CEO of Refined Management since 2015. It provides consultation for small- to medium-sized U.S. manufacturing firms. Before that, Arabo served as president and CEO of the Neighborhood Market Association from 2008 to 2015. A lawsuit stemming from his time in that role ended with a judge ordering Arabo to reimburse the group for \$248,000 in unjustified bonus and expense payments.

The bonus was a \$210,000 finder’s fee paid to Arabo after the sale of NMA’s building,

“even though he was not a broker on the transaction or otherwise entitled to this compensation,” the court ruled. The expenses were \$38,000 in travel and costs not associated with the nonprofit.

“Arabo treated the NMA, a non-profit mutual benefit corporation, as his own personal bank account,” Superior Court Judge Richard E.L. Strauss wrote. “He misused the NMA credit card, lied to the board to justify a \$210,000 bonus, lied to obtain a \$38,000 expense reimbursement,” oversaw the unlawful transfer of \$100,000 from the NMA Education Foundation and used it for non-charitable purposes, and undertook a tax-avoidance scheme with respect to his “personal expense account.”

An appeals court ruled against Arabo in 2021 and upheld the Superior Court ruling that he had to pay the money back.

Arabo was traveling and unavailable for comment, his spokesperson said.

In 2019, two years after the Superior Court ruling, Newsom appointed Arabo to the California Workforce Development Board, which oversees state training and education programs.

The governor’s press office did not provide comment about Arabo’s appointment to the fair board.

The board member positions are unpaid.

Luke Harold writes for the U-T Community Press.



Mark Arabo

MAN PLEADS GUILTY IN ID, GRAND THEFT SCHEME IN SEVERAL COUNTIES

BY CALEB LUNETTA

SAN DIEGO

A 49-year-old man pleaded guilty and was sentenced last week to stealing identities to purchase high-end vehicles from car dealerships throughout Southern California, including in San Diego County, according to state prosecutors.

In a case filed by the California State Attorney General’s Office, Jean Anthony Parret

pleaded guilty Tuesday to multiple counts of identity theft and grand theft after he had opened lines of credit and defrauded lenders in Los Angeles, Kern, Ventura and Riverside counties, according to a Department of Justice news release. He also pleaded guilty to a prior strike special allegation.

Additionally, he pleaded guilty to similar charges in cases filed in San Diego and Orange counties, according to the San Diego County Dis-

trict Attorney’s Office.

The combined guilty pleas resulted in an 11-year prison sentence, authorities said.

In San Diego County, Parret was able to gain the driver’s license and Social Security information of two people, as well as other forms of identification, said Tanya Sierra, a DA’s Office spokesperson.

Using that information, Parret purchased five high-end vehicles by posing as those people between Decem-

ber 2021 and January 2022. The dealerships were in Escondido, Mission Bay and Irvine. The cases were included in the San Diego case because the victims were local, Sierra said.

A month later, Parret used the identifying information

from one of his previous local victims to purchase cars from dealerships in San Diego, Lemon Grove and Santa Monica.

Four of the vehicles purchased with San Diego County residents’ identifying information were never recov-

ered, Sierra said.

The victims throughout Southern California included the lenders, dealerships and identity theft victims who lost about \$400,000, DOJ officials said.

caleb.lunetta@suniontribune.com

Ask Us About Our Move-in Specials!

DISCOVER THE REWARDS OF A LIFE WELL-LIVED AT COGIR OF FALLBROOK.

Offering Independent Living, Assisted Living, and Memory Care

- Luxury Amenities and Fresh Air
- Outdoor Dining Delights
- Pet-Friendly Community
- Countless Events and Activities

Experience the Cogir Difference. Schedule Your Tour today!

COGIR of FALLBROOK Senior Living (760) 645-0238
1735 S Mission Road Fallbrook, CA 92028
License # 374604508

CogirSeniorLiving.com

HOME BANK OF CALIFORNIA

FEELING LEFT BEHIND BY YOUR BANK?

THERE WHEN YOU NEED US

Our team of dedicated, local business bankers are here when you need us. We know how tough things can get, so we are there with you every step of the way.

HomeBank of CALIFORNIA (858) 270-5881 | HBC.BANK
MONDAY-FRIDAY, 9:00 AM - 5:00 PM

Member FDIC

BEAT THE HEAT! AIR CONDITIONING & HEATING SALE

NEW INSTALLATIONS & REPAIRS

UP TO \$3,400 IN REBATES on Installation of NEW High Efficiency A/C And Heating Equipment

UP TO 10 YEAR PARTS & LABOR WARRANTY* *CALL FOR DETAILS

UP TO 72 MONTHS 0% FINANCING AVAILABLE O.A.C.* *CALL FOR DETAILS

✓ Affordable Pricing
✓ Professional Installation
✓ Free Service Call on any repair

DONE RIGHT, GUARANTEED!
We are one of the BEST HVAC companies in San Diego

CALL TODAY 858.434.8636
Airmaxx.com LICENSE #915327

Factory Authorized Dealer
Carrier
Turn to the experts