

Opinion: Commission to police teachers has failed utterly in its duty

By Larry Sand

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A scandal has erupted at California's Commission on Teacher Credentialing, which exists to evaluate teachers and protect children from those who should not be in the classroom.

Its mission is to "ensure integrity and high quality in the preparation, conduct and professional growth of the educators who serve California's public schools." The commission includes teachers, school board members and the state superintendent of public instruction. But a recent explosive report has revealed that instead of being a champion of children, the commission is a callous, self-serving club that ignores its mandated duties.

The first sign that something was amiss came in 2009 when commission lawyer Kathleen Carroll, sensing deep problems within the commission, began asking a lot of questions. In December 2010, she was fired.

Then, in April of this year, State Auditor Elaine Howle released a report that blew the lid off "one of the worst state run agencies" in California.

The report describes a backlog of 12,600 unprocessed reports of arrest and prosecution of educators as of 2009 -- almost three times a typical annual workload. In 40 percent of the cases reviewed, after a report of misconduct was received, it took almost three months to even open a case. After receiving court documents that a teacher was convicted of a crime requiring mandatory revocation of the credential, it sometimes took months to actually revoke it.

While not all 12,600 cases involve allegations that should lead to a teacher's termination, shouldn't we know how many felons, some of whom may be sexual predators, are teaching our children? It took 17 months for the commission to investigate the case of a teacher accused of sharing pornography with his students. Another teacher was allegedly seen kissing a student in 2007, but the commission didn't even contact the school district until 2009.

After the report became public, state Assemblyman Ricardo Lara, D-Bell Gardens,

convened an oversight hearing, insisting that heads should roll -- and indeed commission Executive Director Dale Janssen and General Counsel Mary Armstrong resigned soon after. Then, according to an audit by the Legislature released several weeks ago, Howle said progress was being made and she was optimistic that the agency was taking steps to ensure that past failures wouldn't recur.

AB 229 was introduced to require the state auditor to appoint someone to evaluate commission practices for two years. Commission Chairwoman Ting Sun reported that several administrators are being replaced.

Hopefully the agency's practice of nepotism is also being addressed. Twenty-four past and present members are related to each other -- "a small percentage," according to the leaders of the 160-person staff.

But the matter cannot end with a few personnel changes and short-term oversight. Every member of the commission who abused the public trust by allowing children to be stuck in classrooms with incompetent or criminal teachers should immediately step down and possibly face child endangerment charges. More extensive audits need to be done to identify and address serious problems. In addition, the watchdog position should be permanent.

And there needs to be transparency. Currently the public can go into the commission's database only to verify a teacher's credential. The system should be upgraded to operate like the Medical Board of California's website, where one can learn if any doctor has been accused of wrongdoing by the board, convicted of a felony or issued a letter of reprimand.

Even if the worst offenders detailed in Howle's report constitute a small percentage of the overall cases, our children should never have been exposed to those teachers once the problems surfaced. We need to ensure that won't happen again.

LARRY SAND is president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network and taught in public schools in Los Angeles and New York for 28 years. He wrote this for this newspaper.