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HIGHLIGHTING STRATEGIES FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

A record number of efforts to recall school board candidates in California

NEWS UPDATE

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Fifty members of school boards in California can identify with the ordeal that ended on Sept. 14 for Gov. Gavin Newsom. They too have been subjects of recall campaigns in 2021.

Nationwide, 66 recall efforts involving 171 school board members have been launched this year, according to Ballotpedia, which tracks recalls of public officials. A third of those recall efforts — 22, with many targeting two to four board members — have been in California.

Both are records. Between 2006 and 2020, when Ballotpedia first started tracking, the nationwide yearly average was 23 campaigns. For California, the average was five per year, although there was a dozen in 2010. That was the height of the recession, when school boards were cutting budgets and closing schools — a source of contention. There were 10 recall efforts in 2015 and 2018. Twenty-three states allow recalls of school boards.

This year, parents angry over the slow reopening of schools last spring were behind most of the signature drives, including those in the Sunnyvale, Chico, Mt. Diablo, and San Juan districts. A surprise vote to fire a popular superintendent, Michelle Rodriguez, who was quickly reinstated, led to signature-gathering to recall

the board president of Pajaro Valley Unified in Watsonville. A plan to consolidate two high schools

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Troy Flint, senior director of communications for the California School Boards Association, said that the switch to conducting board meetings online during the pandemic created opportunities for previously involved parents to see how decisions are made.

“That’s the silver lining of the pandemic,” he said. However, the rise in bitterly partisan divisions over Covid and ethnic studies have fed into some of the recall campaigns, he said.

Earlier this month, organizers of the campaign to recall three board members of San Francisco Unified submitted more than the 51,325 signatures required to qualify for a ballot vote for each board member. But most recall efforts will die for lack of enough signatures. Nationwide, Ballotpedia reports that only 29% of recall efforts have reached the ballot since 2006, and 18% of targeted school board members were removed from office through a recall process — about 1 in 6.

A similarly small proportion of recall campaigns eventually goes before California voters. Of the 12 recall efforts in 2010, eight never qualified for a vote, voters defeated one initiative, and board members in three elections — in Stockton, Capistrano and four members in St. Helena Unified in Napa County — were replaced. Of the five recall efforts in 2020, four never made it to a vote; the one that did led to the removal of two board members in the El Rancho School District.

Most of the recall efforts this year are still gathering signatures. The size of a district determines minimum signatures and time limits, ranging from 30% of registered voters for districts with 1,000 or fewer

registered voters, to 160 days to collect 10 percent in districts with more than 100,000 voters.

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Berman, D-Menlo Park, who chairs the Assembly Committee on Elections, and his state Senate counterpart, Steve Glazer, D-Orinda, plan bipartisan hearings on the recall statute, including raising the minimum number of signatures required for a gubernatorial recall and possibly for other public offices as well.

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