

EDUCATION

Why CVUSD student wants to freeze billions in California school funds

Jennifer Cortez Palm Springs Desert Sun

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As part of a lawsuit [led by a student at Coachella Valley High School](#), lawyers are asking a judge to freeze billions of dollars in school modernization funds until California fixes a system that the plaintiffs say provides less money to school districts that serve low-income residents.

Attorneys with the civil rights nonprofit Public Advocates and pro bono counsel from Morrison Foerster filed a motion Friday, March 6 in Alameda County Superior Court seeking a preliminary injunction to halt distribution of most remaining funds from Proposition 2, a statewide school bond [approved by voters](#) in 2024.

"Students in California's low-wealth communities can't stand by any longer while their opportunity to escape dangerous and decaying school conditions is gobbled up by much wealthier districts with less dire needs," John Affeldt, managing attorney at Public Advocates, said in a press release. "Every dollar distributed under this broken system deepens the inequity. Study after study has concluded the system discriminates unfairly against property poor districts; we think a judge will conclude the same."

A lawsuit rooted in the Coachella Valley

One of the lead plaintiffs is Miliani Rodriguez, a senior at Coachella Valley High School in Thermal who [helped launch the lawsuit](#) last fall.

Rodriguez and other plaintiffs across the state argued that California's system for funding school facility upgrades disadvantages districts with lower property wealth, like Coachella Valley Unified School District. CVUSD serves the heavily agricultural east valley, where many of the area's lowest-income residents work as farm laborers or in service industries. The western and central Coachella Valley, which have separate school districts, include most of the area's resorts, golf courses, higher-paying jobs and wealthy retirees.

"Plaintiffs put the state on notice that they needed to fix this unconstitutional formula," said Alicia Virani, senior staff attorney at Public Advocates. "But those demands were essentially ignored by the legislature, necessitating this motion to preserve funds."

The case also includes several other local plaintiffs, including Sandra Ramirez, a CVUSD parent volunteer; Perla Penalber, a teacher at Coachella Valley High; and Alianza Coachella Valley, [a nonprofit](#) focused on education and environmental justice in the eastern Coachella Valley and Salton Sea region.

During a press conference in October, Rodriguez described how the funding gap is visible at her high school, where classrooms can rise above 85 degrees when air conditioning fails as temperatures reach triple digits over the summer.

The complaint also describes leaking roofs that require buckets in classrooms, broken sinks in the restrooms and aging portable classroom trailers where mold, rodents and damaged

lawsuit was announced last year.

More: [Parents of children with disabilities protest CVUSD over mold issue](#)

Suit alleges wealthier schools get more funding in California

The pending lawsuit [challenges California's School Facility Program](#), which requires K-12 districts to cover about 40% of modernization costs locally before qualifying for state matching funds. Schools generally must also be at least 25 years old to qualify for modernization funding.

However, advocates say the program favors districts that can more easily pass large school bond measures to finance their share of construction projects.

Since 1998, modernization funding has [disproportionally flowed](#) to wealthier districts, leaving students in lower-wealth districts with nearly 60% less funding per student, according to the Public Policy Institute of California.

Thousands of school buildings across California are in poor condition, with leaky roofs, broken air conditioning, peeling paint and other safety hazards. About 38% of students attend schools that [fall short](#) of the state's minimum safety standards, Public Policy Institute of California found. Research shows students in substandard facilities have lower attendance, lower morale and lower academic achievement.

In recent elections, two of the Coachella Valley's three K-12 school districts — the two that serve the valley's wealthiest cities — have turned to local bond measures to fund campus modernization projects.

In March 2024, voters living with the boundaries of Desert Sands Unified School District [approved a \\$675 million bond](#) to repair and modernize its campuses. Later that year, in November, Palm Springs Unified School District also [passed a \\$465 million bond](#) to upgrade its school facilities.

By contrast, Coachella Valley Unified School District, which is grappling with a structural deficit and working to maintain financial solvency, decided in January 2024 not to pursue a

including rebuilding Coachella Valley High School, would carry significant costs and said she is reluctant to ask residents to shoulder the burden of a school bond while interest rates remain high.

An Alameda County Superior Court judge is expected to schedule a hearing in the coming weeks.

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