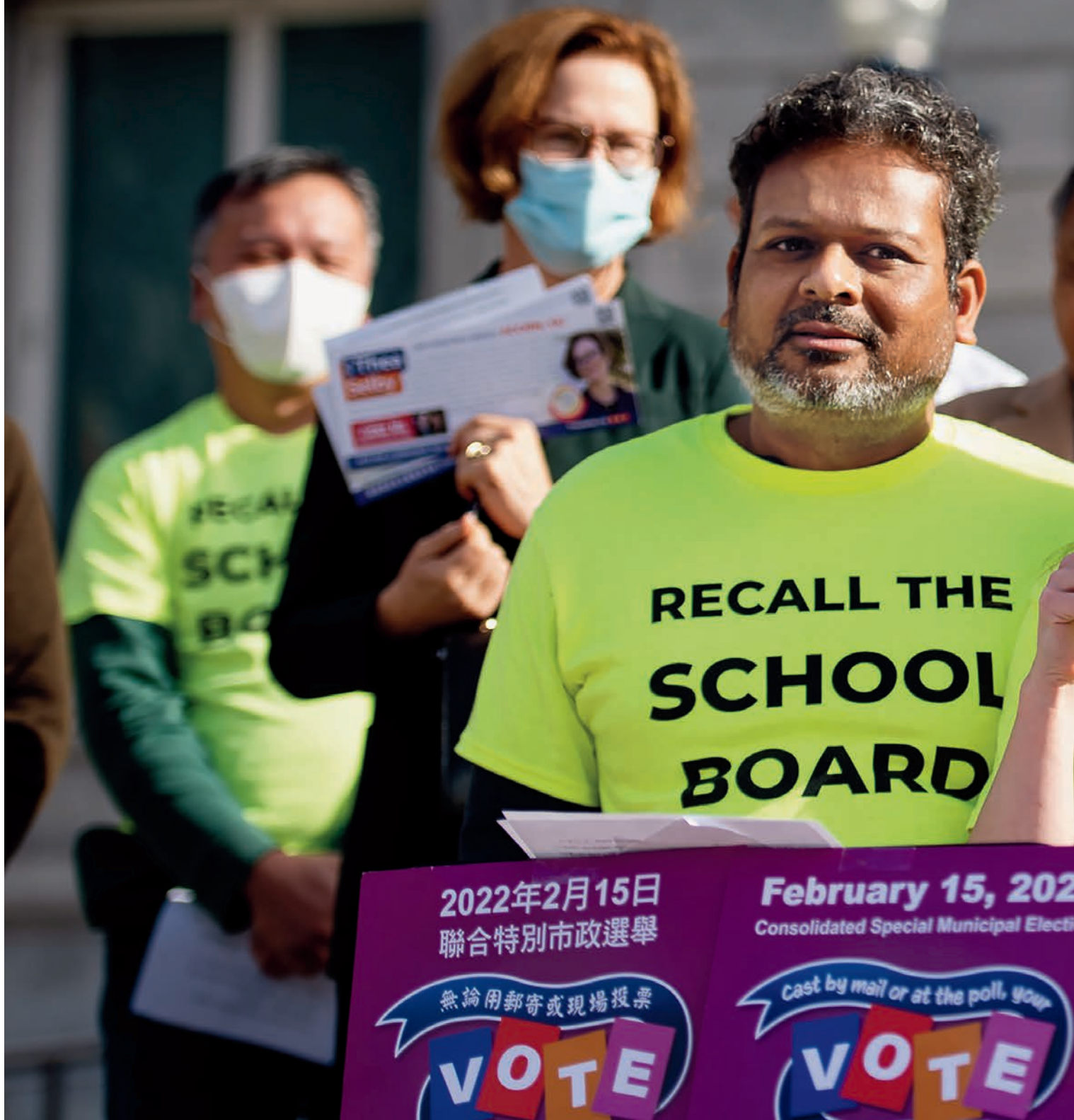


SCHOOL BOARD SHAKEUP



IN SAN FRANCISCO

*Arrogance,
incompetence,
and woke rhetoric
trigger successful
recall effort*

By JOANNE JACOBS



The San Francisco school-board recall effort was led by parents Siva Raj (left) and Autumn Looijen.

BETH LABERGE / KQED

San Francisco's coronavirus rates were lower than those in other cities, its vaccination rates higher. Yet the public schools remained closed longer there than in any other major city.

these areas was split. Voters in the wealthier neighborhoods scored a high turnout and voted heavily for the recall, perhaps because of the board's scrapping of merit-based admissions at Lowell High School.

"The voters of this City have delivered a clear message that the School Board must focus on the essentials of delivering a well-run school system above all else," said Mayor London Breed, who strongly endorsed the recall.

Moliga stepped down the day after the recall vote, but López and Collins stayed until March 11, when they were officially removed. That same day, the mayor replaced the ousted members with three parents, Lainie Motamedi, Lisa Weissman-Ward, and Ann Hsu, who will help choose a new superintendent in June. The three will have to win their seats in November to stay on the board.

Breed consulted with parents, community groups, and the recall organizers before making her choices for the board. Both Hsu, who campaigned for the recall, and Motamedi had served on school-district committees.

Lengthy School Closures

San Francisco's coronavirus rates were lower than those in other cities, its vaccination rates higher. Yet the public schools remained closed longer in San Francisco than in any other major city. Elementary-school students were out for a year, and the city had to sue to force the district to reopen. Middle and high schools didn't reopen until fall 2021. (Two high schools opened with "supervision"—but no teaching—for two weeks in May, to qualify for a state grant.)

Led by López, the board president, and Collins, the school board "put performative politics over children," said Todd David, a father of three who created a parents' group to support the recall

IT WAS WHITE SUPREMACISTS and their allies, tweeted Gabriela López, who cost her her seat on the San Francisco Board of Education after city residents voted by a three-to-one margin to remove her from office. "If you fight for racial justice, this is the consequence."

Alison Collins, who served as vice president of the board until the surfacing of anti-Asian tweets she had written in 2016, also saw herself as a political martyr in the recall vote. She'd fought to "desegregate" the city's selective (and majority Asian) high school, Lowell, by ending merit-based admissions.

Shamann Walton, president of the County Board of Supervisors, blamed "closet Republicans." (In a city where 86 percent voted for Joe Biden, that's a very large closet.)

So, is bluer-than-blue San Francisco turning red? Well, it's not Virginia. But the school-board earthquake of 2022 has shaken up the political reality.

What's more, the recall effort was not a conservative cause. It was launched and supported by independents, moderates, and progressives who were infuriated by a toxic mix of incompetence, arrogance, and woke rhetoric.

Residents of nearly every neighborhood voted overwhelmingly on February 15 to recall López, Collins, and Faauga Moliga, who was far less unpopular with the city's residents but was unable to separate himself from his colleagues. The 36 percent turnout—47 percent for those requesting a Chinese-language ballot—was higher than expected for an off-cycle election. Low-income neighborhoods posted a low turnout, and the vote in



San Francisco school-board members (from left) commissioner Alison Collins, vice president Faauga Moliga, and president Gabriela López were voted out via recall.

LEFT TO RIGHT: SCOTT STRAZZANTE / THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE; POLARIS; MICHAEL SHORT; GABRIELLE LURIE / THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE / POLARIS

STEPHEN LAM / SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE / POLARIS (3)



San Francisco mayor London Breed replaced the recalled school-board members with three parents (clockwise from top left): Lisa Weissman-Ward, Ann Hsu, and Lainie Motamedi.

campaign. “What really bothered me is that, early in the pandemic, the superintendent wanted to have a reopening consultant, funded by private donors, and the board said no because the consultant had worked for charter schools,” he said.

“There is no Plan B,” Superintendent Vincent Matthews had warned the board. And there wasn’t.

When it was clear schools wouldn’t reopen in fall 2020, city staffers worked with community groups and nonprofits to open “hubs” where needy students could get supervised remote learning, meals, and recreation. Hubs opened in rec centers, YMCAs, Boys & Girls’ Clubs, and libraries—but not in public schools or on school playgrounds. In a study, researchers blamed resistance from the board, specifically Collins, and from the teachers union.

“The city did amazing work to open learning hubs,” said David. “The board . . . it’s rare to see a governing body so completely fail.”

While public schools were closed—and private schools were open—the board decided to rename 44 schools based on a muddled and historically inaccurate process that declared Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Paul Revere, Dianne Feinstein, and others insufficiently pure.

Mayor called it “offensive” to rename schools that weren’t open. Even San Franciscans who supported renaming some schools thought the board should have waited until the crisis was over—and until someone could figure out whether Roosevelt Middle School was

named for Teddy or FDR.

Ultimately, the board dropped the renaming effort. It also failed in its quest to whitewash a historic mural at Washington High School.

But the board’s virtue signaling also signaled an indifference to the job of running a school district.

In January 2021, nearly a year into remote education, the district reported significant learning losses for Black, Hispanic, and Asian students and students from low-income families.

López waved off these results. Students “are learning more about their families and their cultures” and “just having different learning experiences than the ones we currently measure,” she told the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

At a board meeting in March 2021, Collins reminded Ritu Khanna, the district’s chief of research, planning, and assessment, to use the term “learning change” instead of “learning loss.”

That infuriated Kit Lam, an immigrant from Hong Kong with two children. He saw his teenage son struggling with distance learning and knew the boy was not

alone. As an investigator for the school district, Lam saw that “many students were falling way, way behind,” and others were just missing.

Lam Zoomed into school-board meetings, staying up late and hoping to hear about the reopening plan. There was no plan.

The recall effort was the brainchild of two newcomers to San Francisco, a high-tech couple with no political experience or contacts. Siva Raj’s two children were struggling with remote classes and had become frustrated, depressed, bored, and angry. Autumn Looijen’s three children were learning—happily—in person in suburban Los Altos, one of the first Bay Area districts to reopen schools.

Raj and Looijen put the recall on social media, and it caught fire. Lam reached out to them and volunteered to translate the recall site into Chinese and then to collect signatures on recall petitions and then to register voters. “At first, I wanted to be anonymous,” Lam says. “But I made a promise to my son: ‘I will speak for you.’ So I spoke out.”

When Lam’s union of school-district workers met to discuss the election, he argued in favor of the recall. He lost the first vote: staffers wanted to stand with the teachers union, he says. But, on a second vote, they decided not to contribute money or volunteers to the anti-recall campaign.

Fire in the Belly

At nearly every high school in America that admits students based on grades and test scores, hard-studying Asian-American students are well represented. For years, San Francisco has tinkered with Lowell’s admissions

In 2021, the school board voted to turn Lowell High School into a comprehensive high school open to all students. Lowell alumni were furious. So were Asian immigrant parents.

process to qualify more Black and Hispanic students but has made little progress.

The board used a lottery for admissions in 2020, arguing that the pandemic had disrupted grades and testing. Collins showed her disdain for the traditional test-based admissions process in a board meeting. “Merit, meritocracy, and especially meritocracy based on standardized testing . . . those are racist systems,” she said.

The next year, the board voted to turn Lowell into a comprehensive high school open to all students. Lowell alumni were furious. So were Asian immigrant parents (see “Exam-School Admissions Come Under Pressure amid Pandemic,” *features*, Spring 2021).

“People see the success of Asian students and think they’re advantaged,” said Lam. In Chinatown, “you can see a family of four living in a single room with a shared bathroom down the hall. We rely on good public education. We can’t afford private school.”

Lowell alumni filed a lawsuit, which ultimately succeeded. The new school board will decide Lowell’s fate. Hsu and Motamedi support merit-based admissions at Lowell. Weissman-Ward did not commit herself but said she supports “academically rigorous programs.”

Not long after the recall campaign began, someone posted tweets by Collins from 2016, before she joined the board, in which she accused Asian Americans of using “white supremacist thinking to assimilate and ‘get ahead’” and remarked that “being a house n****r is still being a n****r.”

In the uproar, Collins was ousted as vice president and was replaced by Moliga. She remained in office, but the majority of board members gave her a no-confidence vote. Collins sued the district and her board colleagues (except



JANA ASENBERNEROVA

Mayor London Breed, who strongly endorsed the recall, said that the San Francisco school board “must focus on the essentials of delivering a well-run school system above all else.”



BRONTI WITTPENN / SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE / POLARIS

An issue at the heart of the recall election was the school board's attempt to abolish merit-based admissions at Lowell High School amidst claims meritocratic policies were "racist." Lowell alumni filed a lawsuit, which succeeded. The new school board will decide Lowell's fate.

for López) for \$87 million. Among other things, the suit charged "injury to spiritual solace."

The suit, thrown out by a judge in August 2021, "cost the budget-strapped district some \$400,000 to defend," wrote Clara Jeffery in *Mother Jones*.

It would have been the last straw for San Franciscans, if there weren't so many other last straws.

Chinese Americans, already angry about the board's

hostility to merit-based admissions, saw the tweets as proof that they were getting no respect.

"Education is a fire-in-the-belly issue" for Chinese parents, said Bayard Fong, president of the Chinese-American Democratic Club and the father of three children. His wife works for the district as an administrator.

The school board "acted as though some students mattered more than others," said Fong. "We were being

The state has threatened to take over if the district can't balance its budget. To survive financially, the district must regain parents' trust and stop losing students, said parent Patrick Wolff.

ignored or treated as though we were the problem.”

The club provided 100 volunteers to gather signatures for recall petitions.

Ann Hsu, one of the mayor's replacements for the ousted school-board members, was a PTA president and former Silicon Valley entrepreneur who hadn't been involved in politics before the recall effort arose. Then she saw her son languishing during 18 months of remote schooling. Unengaged by online classes, he “wasted his time all day, every day, playing video games,” she wrote in the *New York Post*.

Hsu helped form the Chinese/API Voter Outreach Taskforce to register voters for the recall. Many residents were not aware that noncitizen parents, empowered by a 2016 charter-amendment ballot initiative, can vote for school board in San Francisco. Volunteers signed up noncitizens too.

Chinese in America must “learn to speak up,” wrote Hsu.

“We Won't Be Silent Anymore”

The board managed to anger a lot of other groups, too.

When the recall qualified for the ballot, Todd David, who runs the Housing Action Coalition, backed Raj and Looijen with his political savvy. He had political experience working for the election of State Senator Scott Wiener, another pro-recall liberal. “Siva and Autumn did a phenomenal job of grassroots organizing,” said David. “I knew how to do fundraising and a traditional campaign.” The recall raised an astounding \$1.9 million, including large donations from high-tech investors and real-estate groups.

The “no on recall” side raised a small fraction of that, mostly from unions, and got some volunteers from the “Berniecrats,” but only Moliga really tried to fight the recall.

The school board's defenders said wealthy “privatizers” wanted to destroy public education. One of the donors to the recall effort was the pioneer venture capitalist Arthur Rock, 95, a billionaire who has also supported charter schools.

But others say the recall was the only way to save San Francisco Unified.

“Parents who have choices are opting out,” said Patrick Wolff, a parent who runs Families for San Francisco, which launched Campaign for Better Public Schools to back the recall.

“The recall effort, while catalyzed by Covid, reflects deep discontent of the parent community with the state of the public schools,” said Wolff. “San Francisco has some of the worst achievement gaps in the state and one of the worst 3rd-grade reading levels.”

The state has threatened to take over if the district can't balance its budget. To survive financially, the district must regain parents' trust and stop losing students, said Wolff.

It won't be easy.

San Francisco has the lowest percentage of children of any major city—more dogs than children—and a high percentage of those children attend private school. Before the pandemic, the school board tended to fly under the radar.

“During the pandemic, parents paid a lot more attention to the schools,” said Wolff. “Everything was on Zoom.”

Families for San Francisco will inform parents—and the whole city—of what public schools are doing, he said. The group already has challenged the district's claim that “equity math” is working, citing missing, misleading, and cherry-picked data in the school system's evaluations.

The Chinese-American community will have more clout going forward because of the landslide recall vote, Fong said. “We won't be silent anymore. We're standing up.”

School-board members will treat citizens with more respect, predicts Raj. They now know that people are watching.

The next political earthquake in San Francisco could come in June, when voters will decide whether to recall District Attorney Chesa Boudin, who some blame for the city's crime wave.

Despite a surge in school-board recall efforts across the country in 2021, most didn't qualify for the ballot. Ballotpedia tracked 92 such efforts naming 237 officials. Ultimately, 17 officials were subject to recall votes, and only one was recalled. More recall efforts are in the works in 2022, often motivated by disagreements on pandemic policies and how to teach about gender identity and racism. In Loudoun County, Virginia, where school-board meetings have been very contentious, a conservative parent group called Fight for Schools is leading a campaign to recall some board members. It's a liberal county—Republican Glenn Youngkin got only 44 percent of the vote there in his winning bid for governor—but anything is possible in 2022.

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