

# OPINION

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

FIRST AMENDMENT TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION



GUY PARSONS



**CalMatters**  
**Commentary**  
Dan Walters  
Columnist

## Politicians facing make or break moments

“A crisis is a terrible thing to waste,” Stanford economist Paul Romer said at a venture capital seminar 21 years ago, referring to the increasing levels of education in other countries that would make them more competitive with the United States.

Romer’s comment transmogrified into a political slogan when Rahm Emanuel, manager of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential victory, attributed it to exploiting popular angst over a deep recession.

“You never want a serious crisis to go to waste,” Emanuel told an interviewer.

Notwithstanding the remark’s implied cynicism, crises — either real or merely perceived — can make or break political careers as news media and the voting public judge how those who hold or aspire to office respond.

John F. Kennedy’s cool defusing of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, for instance, was the defining moment of his presidency. Gray Davis became the only California governor to be recalled after clumsily responding to a budget crisis and a financial meltdown of the electrical power system.

At this moment, California faces two crises: horribly destructive and deadly wildfires in Los Angeles County and fears that President Donald Trump will either deny federal relief or use it as leverage to force California to change its policies.

The political figure most obviously affected by the twin crises is Gov. Gavin Newsom, who simultaneously beseeches Trump to send California many billions of dollars, and positions himself as a leader of resistance to Trump’s presidential decrees and a potential 2028 presidential candidate.

How Newsom juggles those two conflicted roles could well determine not only how his governorship is remembered but whether his political career extends beyond his last two years in office.

The wildfire crisis is already threatening the career of another politician, Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass. She had left her city for a ceremonial visit to Ghana despite warnings that Los Angeles was in critical wildfire danger, and upon returning was widely criticized for her initial absence and the shortcomings of the city’s fire department.

Politico reports that a poll has found that 54% of Los Angeles residents disapprove of Bass’ handling of the fire crisis while 37% approve. The poll was commissioned by Madison McQueen, a local media firm with Republican connections. In a memo, its president, Owen Brennan, said, “Rather than follow predictable partisan patterns, voters in LA are fed up with failure and are demanding more competence from their elected officials.”

However, other political figures are not wasting the opportunities that California’s twin crises offer, as Emanuel suggested. Chief among them is Attorney General Rob Bonta. He is widely expected to run for governor next year, and although he has so far refused to say one way or the other, he has tirelessly sought public and media attention. For months, Bonta’s office had been issuing daily press releases. But last week, as the fires burned and Trump was doing what Trump does, the production of handouts from Bonta’s media staff shifted into a higher degree. On Friday, it distributed four press releases declaring his opposition to Trump policies on immigration, LGBTQ rights, air pollution and abortion.

## ‘Setting the record straight’ at CVUSD



**Your Turn**  
Dr. Frances Esparza  
Guest columnist

There has been much discussion about the budget shortfall at Coachella Valley Unified School District. I want to take a moment to share the facts, address any misconceptions and explain the steps the district is taking to move forward.

First, let me express my deep gratitude for the extraordinary educators and staff in our district. Since I began serving as superintendent six months ago, I have been inspired by their unwavering dedication to our nearly 16,000 students and families. The budget challenges facing the district are serious, but do not overshadow the remarkable successes happening in our schools every day.

### How we got here

Our current budget challenges stem from several factors. First, between 2020 and 2023, CVUSD received \$199 million in federal COVID-19 relief funds to address urgent needs, such as the purchase of products to keep students and staff safe — this included maintaining a standard air quality and following social distance protocols. This also included the support for online learning, providing essential services, and mitigating learning loss. These funds supported temporary staff positions, including additional teachers, to meet unprecedented demands.

When these funding streams ended in 2023, the temporary positions were not reduced nor eliminated, creating a \$37 million revenue shortfall. The board of trustees approved eliminating these positions, but necessary actions were not fully implemented. Essentially, while the board directed the elimination of these positions was approved, Human Resources personnel failed to initiate the necessary paperwork for the termination process.

In addition to the end COVID-19 relief funds, reduced state funding further compounded the district’s financial challenges. For the 2024-25 school year, the Cost-of-Living Adjustment was reduced to 1.07%, a sharp decline from the earlier projection of 3.94%. This was due to a drop in corporate and personal income taxes that support the state’s budget. For CVUSD, this change meant a nearly \$15 million loss in anticipated revenue in the multiyear financial projection.

Finally, when the district closed the books for 2022-23 there was a 17% reserve balance. However, upon further analysis, this reserve was not sustainable over multiple fiscal years due to an ongoing structural deficit first identified in 2019. CVUSD continued to calculate their budget without

factoring in the deficit identified in 2019, so the district wasn’t aware of the need to make cutbacks and potentially make layoffs until last year, after an audit by the Riverside County Office of Education.

This unaddressed deficit, coupled with the drop in the state COLA and not fully implementing board approved layoffs, has resulted in a shortfall of approximately \$60 million dollars.

### Fixing the problem

To address this challenge, we will be implementing several measures, including: a hiring freeze across all departments, repurposing redevelopment dollars to support the General Fund, and reducing external afterschool and mental health contracts while preserving core services for students and families.

Despite these efforts, these steps are not enough. The board of trustees has approved a fiscal stabilization plan, which includes staff reductions. This difficult decision is part of a broader strategy that eliminates \$52 million of the budget shortfall in the next fiscal year, \$6.1 million the following year, and \$2 million in the third year.

### Moving forward

To support those who will be directly affected by the reduction in force, we will provide a variety of resources, including workshops on unemployment benefits, a hiring fair to assist with exploring and applying for positions within and outside the district and emotional and mental health support services to help navigate this transition.

To ensure CVUSD does not repeat the mistakes that brought us to this point, the district is taking several steps. New fiscal management systems to strengthen accountability and transparency are being implemented. Communication protocols are being put in place to ensure all staff have a clear and common understanding of financial matters and decision-making processes. New internal control procedures have been developed to ensure that directives by the board of trustees are implemented as approved.

While we cannot minimize the impact of these cuts — \$60 million represents nearly 15% of CVUSD’s budget — this is a necessary step to rebuild and secure our district’s future.

Coachella Unified is one of the most resilient and resourceful communities in the nation. We have shown time and again our ability to overcome challenges, both man-made and natural. There is no doubt CVUSD will rise above this moment and continue to provide a quality education, inspiration and leadership for the thousands of students and families who trust us with their futures.

*Dr. Frances Esparza is the superintendent of the Coachella Valley Unified School District. She can be reached at frances.esparza@cvusd.us.*



Charlie Cooper is a youth wheelchair tennis player who is Ranked No. 3 in the U.S. He is photographed at Indian Wells Tennis Gardens as he practices with his coach. OMAR ORNELAS/THE DESERT SUN

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Congrats to La Quinta tennis champion, Charlie Cooper

The Coachella Valley’s best athlete, 17-year-old Charlie Cooper, just won the 2025 Australian Open Boys’ Wheelchair Tennis Championship by defeating Belgium’s Alexander Lantermann. Charlie also won the 2024 Boy’s US Open Wheelchair Championship in New York City and was named the 2024 Junior Wheelchair Tennis Player of the Year by the International Tennis Federation.

The award honored Charlie for his fantastic commitment to wheelchair tennis by supporting local programs. It was concluded that Charlie is a great ambassador for the sport of tennis because of his work ethic, his respect and compassion for fellow players and his enjoyment of showing younger players how to play wheelchair tennis. Charlie’s great tennis coach is Indio’s D’Wayne Begay.

We can all enjoy watching Charlie play at his home course this March, the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden. I hope to see you there.

*Michael P. Friedman, La Quinta*

### Thank You Ophelia and American Express!

My name is Savannah and I’m a senior at Shadow Hills High School, a member of the girl’s golf team and an Ophelia Girl!

Last Sunday, my father and I were honorary observers walking “inside the ropes” alongside tournament leaders in The American Express. And it was incredible!

Due to the generosity of American Express and the PGA Tour, I was able to have this amazing opportunity. Through naming the Ophelia Project, a local mentoring program for eighth through 12th grade girls, as the PGA Tour’s National Charity of the Year, they invest deeply back into the Coachella Valley and give girls like me a chance of a lifetime!

Not only did the Tour give exclusive ground tickets, but they awarded \$30,000 to support Ophelia’s long-standing tradition in providing scholarships to senior Ophelia girls. With 439 girls in 20 schools in the valley and with 81 Ophelia mentors, such support helps young women continue to succeed.

We are so grateful for your recognition.  
*Savannah Vela, Indio*

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