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HIGHLANDS
COMMUNITY CHARTER AND TECHNICAL SCHOOLS



Layoffs at area charter school sparks fear for Afghan refugees

BY ISHANI DESAI

As a child growing up in Pakistan, Khalida Omar dreamed of wearing a doctor's white lab coat to help anyone who asked. But her aspirations died when her brother forbid her from attending school, stopping her education at seventh grade.

Omar eventually married, becoming busy with raising their child and caring for family in Afghanistan. Then, her family fled home when the [Taliban recaptured the country](#) in August 2021 as [American troops withdrew](#) after a nearly 20-year occupation. Her husband, who obtained a Special Immigrant Visa while working with the U.S. military, settled in Sacramento, following a family member who had also relocated to the area.

Her hopes of entering the medical profession grew again after enrolling at [Highlands Community Charter School](#), under the [Twin Rivers Unified School District](#), to learn English and begin her studies.

"I was born again," Omar, 31, said in Dari, through a translator conveying her words in English.

But her long-awaited schooling spiraled into uncertainty



Khalida Omar, 31, wipes away tears last month at a Highlands Community Charter campus on Edison Avenue in Arden Arcade as she recalls — through an interpreter — how her father supported her education in Pakistan, but her brother stopped her from continuing after seventh grade. After marrying an Afghan man, she came to the U.S. with him on a Special Immigrant Visa, hoping to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. With Highlands Community Charter and Technical School's Edison Avenue campus at risk of closing, that dream is once again in jeopardy.

once again. The California Legislature requested the state auditor probe the Highlands Community Charter School after ABC10 published in January 2024 a [nine-part series titled "The Wild West of Education."](#) The series "raised questions about the potential falsification of student attendance records, poor student outcomes, conflict of interest, and misuse of state funds for gifts to staff and students, luxury travel, staff bonuses and political contributions," [according to an April](#)

[2024 letter requesting an audit.](#)

The result of the school's alleged conduct could result in layoffs of 80% of its staff, potentially cutting student enrollment by about 6,000. The locations, students and teachers said, provide more than education: It offers a community for refugees trapped at home without English and connects them to childcare, laundry and domestic violence resources.

"That's going to create turmoil across all of those communities, right along with the city



Paraeducator Nelofar Nasir, left, sits with student Dibi Bakhshi Kargar last month at their school in Arden Arcade. Both are concerned about the possible closure of the Highlands Community Charter and Technical School campus. Nasir said the school offers more than English classes – it connects students to vital community resources, including domestic violence support. She fears closures could isolate women by cutting off access to phones, bus passes and other critical services.

of Sacramento and the region,” Highlands Community Charter School’s Executive Director Bill McGuire said in an interview last month. He denied any misappropriation of funds or fraud.

The Twin Rivers School District provided the charter school with a notice it is in “material violation of the conditions, standards and procedures set forth in its Charter, has failed to meet generally accepted accounting principles or engaged in fiscal mismanagement.” The notice of violation was included on Tuesday’s district board agenda.

The violation notice included findings such as bloated class sizes, lack of student attendance and “luxury office condominiums” in San Diego with no apparent educational purpose.

low”>People from Afghanistan make up nearly a majority of Highlands Community Charter School’s approximate 12,000 students, according to school data. Sacramento County is home to the largest population of Afghan refugees in America, [according to the 2021 resolution from the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors](#).

The nonprofit Highlands Community Charter and Technical Schools operates both the Highlands Community Charter School, a K-12 credentialed school, and the California Innovative Career Academy, which offers independent study. Under both schools, there are more than 50 campuses across the Sacramento area, the East Bay and Southern California. It is geared toward adults, 22 and

older, who are seeking to get their high school diploma and find employment.

The charter school acknowledged in March its wrongdoing and offered to pay back \$13 million in state funds attributed to misappropriating attendance in the 2021-22 school year, according to ABC10.

But McGuire, who said school officials will challenge state auditor’s findings, said the school site should not be completely shut down. His last day is June 30, which is the last day for laid off staff members, said deputy director Mayra Valdivia.

“We take full responsibility, for whatever reason, we screwed this up in the past,” McGuire said. He later added, “But to just turn it off is a travesty for students and employees.”

Erased from public life

On a recent morning, Diba Bakhshi Kargar hunched over a desk and attempted to match pronouns with the right name on a worksheet at a school in Arden Arcade. Her traditional Afghan dress rustled as she turned in her desk to help other women with lessons, whispering and laughing as they worked.

“Did you finish your list?” their teacher, Mavzuna Rahimova, asked the class.

“Yes!” the class responded back, many snapping to attention after working individually.

For Bakhshi Kargar, stopping these classes is like living once again under Taliban rule in

Afghanistan. She could never become an educator in her motherland despite attaining a college degree in teaching, she said.

The Taliban's takeover in 2021 rolled back women's rights and freedoms. They are prohibited from working, enrolling in classes, using specific public spaces and must cover their body from head to toe, [according to a 2024 United Nations report](#). The restrictions hurt women's mental health when they cannot seek physical exercise or must limit interactions with others, the report said.

The result, the report found, erased women from public life.

Back in 2021, Bakhschi Kargar gripped her 40-day-old baby amid large crowds at an airport in Kabul hoping to leave Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover. Her husband, also with a Special Immigrant Visa, had to leave the country to avoid the Taliban's retaliation, she said in Dari, and translated into English by a teacher's assistant.

Without understanding English in the U.S., Bakshki Kargar couldn't talk to her doctor, her children's teacher or help them with their homework. She felt isolated as her husband worked long hours delivering food as a DoorDash driver leaving her alone without anyone to talk to or anywhere to go.

But through word of mouth, Bakshki Kargar heard of lessons offered by the Highlands Com-



Svetlana Brunner, far right, teaches Level 2 English to refugees in a packed ESL class at Highlands Community Charter and Technical School's Grand Avenue campus in Sacramento last month. "The impact of closing our school is going to be devastating for thousands of our students," said Brunner, who has been teaching for more than three years. "People tell us 'Send them to a college, send them to other adult schools' but there is no capacity for 10,000 of our students."

munity Charter School.

The campus on Edison Avenue offered Bakshki Kargar a community of women to meet and converse. They could swap resources and grow together, she said. Teachers became her friends.

And the lessons, she said, gave her a fighting chance to stand on her own two feet.

So when Bakshki Kargar class heard of their school's potential closure, everyone started crying, students and teachers said. Without the school, Bakshki Kargar said she will have no freedom and depression will rear its head again.

The school gave her a cellphone to use for educational purposes and serves as a bus pass she uses to come to class. That phone, she said, could be

taken away.

'They are my family'

The Highlands Community Charter School occupies a special designation as a "K-12 funded adult charter school" which McGuire called a "different kind of unicorn."

"It's very specialized," he said.

The school operated under this special section in the law for about 10 years which allowed teachers to not hold a K-12 credential, he said. Only about 50 educators have the required credentials to work, he said.

McGuire said the school paid millions to ensure teachers have the correct authorizations, and for 10 years, this concern was not flagged by Twin Rivers Dis-



Mariam Mostajab teaches a zero-level English class for beginners at Highlands Community Charter and Technical School's Grand Avenue campus in Sacramento last month. Many of the students are Afghan refugees who did not attend school in Afghanistan, according to the school's principal.

district school officials.

The Twin Rivers School District oversees the charter school and ensures its compliance with laws. Zenobia Gerald, a district spokesperson, said in an emailed statement that the district has "consistently met this obligation for Highlands Community Charter and Technical Schools" since its founding in 2014.

Gerald said district officials received "new direction" about credentialing requirements in December 2024 from a state agency called the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, which oversees teacher's licenses and credentials.

"As a result, all educators at the charter must now hold appropriate K-12 credentials, even for programs previously iden-

tified as adult education," the statement said.

But there have been no changes to recent law which affected teachers working at K-12 funded adult charter schools, said Jonathon Howard, a spokesperson with the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing.

The lack of appropriate authorizations for teachers was found by a state auditor this year, and its findings will be released this month.

"Adult Education credentials do not authorize teaching K-12 content in K-12 public schools settings, even if students are going back to earn their diplomas," Howard said.

Highlands Community Charter School "failed to meet generally accepted accounting principles, and/or engaged in

fiscal mismanagement," according to a violation notice sent by the district in a letter dated June 12 and included in Tuesday's board meeting agenda.

The school secured a site at "luxury office condominiums" in San Diego for "administrative purposes despite having no students in or near the area," the violation notice said. The school's space includes "a dedicated balcony with unparalleled view of Petco Park."

The highest priced unit in the office costs \$725,000, the violation notice said.

The audit will focus on attendance policies and procedures; verify enrollment data; check instructor credentials; ensure fair hiring practices safeguard against nepotism and conflict of interest; if the charter school's "financial information" is appropriate and are best practices; and determine if Twin Rivers District has "responded appropriately" to alleged violations, [according to the state auditor](#).

"The Commission recognizes the disruption to educators, families, and students and remains committed to helping affected educators understand their options," Howard said.

For some teachers, the closure of school is more than just losing work.

Nelofar Nasir, a teacher's assistant, waited recently outside a classroom on Edison Avenue when a student approached and hugged her.

The student dreamed of Nasir and their teacher Mazuna

the night before, rocked with uncertainty of the school closing. Everyday, students asked for updates on the potential closure of the campus on Edison Avenue, Nasir said.

"I feel like they are my family," Nasir said.

Nasir feeds off her student's energy in class, and loves watching them gain their footing in the U.S. She also served as a conduit in life-threatening incidents for her pupils.

Women and men come to her, seeking help to connect to domestic violence resources, after not knowing where to turn. They don't know who can help. They don't know which number to call. And when told to call police, they are scared about their lack of English to report incidents, Nasir said.

The wraparound services at Highlands Community Charter School also helps students take away all the other factors which could prevent them from attaining their education, McGuire, the executive director said. The campus on Edison Avenue is right next to a church in which students often lined up after class to access a food bank.

"This is a travesty for the students," he said.

Uncertainty remains

Omar carries the burden of wanting to provide for her family back in her native Pakistan and ease the burden on her husband who works as an Uber driver.

The responsibility Omar feels



Khalida Omar, 31, who grew up in Pakistan and married an Afghan SIV holder and lived in Afghanistan, leaves the classroom at Highlands Community Charter School's Edison Avenue campus in Arden Arcade last month. She said – through an interpreter – that her hopes of entering the medical profession were rekindled after enrolling: "I felt like I was reborn."

to provide for her family grew after her brother and father died within the last seven months. The grief hurts, feels as sharp as it did when she first learned her father died after suffering heart problems.

Her father, a rickshaw driver, had encouraged her to study. He supported her in choosing a husband, and was upset that Omar's brother blocked her from attending school.

The Highlands Community Charter School will close 26 campuses by July 1, though some may open by September after the district approves their plans, Valdivia said.

America afforded her the freedom to walk outside and go to stores when she wanted. In Afghanistan, Omar often stayed home, and in the midst of taking care of her family, she had

no time to even wonder about trying to become a doctor.

English lessons at the charter school afforded her the opportunity to dream again. She hopes to talk to people without a translator, and has started to grasp the language, just a little, after four years in America.

Most of all, she said, she hopes learning English will allow her to speak with her two children as they grow up in this country.

HIGHLANDS COMMUNITY CHARTER SCHOOL RESPONDS TO STATE AUDIT WITH SWEEPING REFORMS, NEW LEADERSHIP

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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DATE: JUNE 24, 2025

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (June 24, 2025) — In response to the findings of the Joint Legislative Audit Committee's (JLAC) report into Highlands Community Charter and Technical Schools, the school today announced a comprehensive reform agenda and the appointment of a new Executive Director to lead the institution into a new era of transparency, accountability, and service.

Jonathan Raymond, former Superintendent of Sacramento City Unified School District and a nationally respected education leader, has been appointed to lead Highlands through a full-scale turnaround effort. His mandate is clear: to confront past failures, restore public confidence, and protect a critical institution that serves thousands of immigrants, adult learners, and returning citizens every year.

"The JLAC report reveals serious issues with how Highlands operated in the past," **said Executive Director Raymond**. "We take these findings seriously and will not run from them. We are committed to rebuilding Highlands from the ground up — not just to fix what went wrong, but to build something better. Moving forward, we are entirely focused on our mission to serve the underserved. For the thousands of immigrants, refugees, and adults who depend on this school as a lifeline, we cannot fail. I'm here to ensure we won't."

Highlands serves more than 10,000 adult students each year, most of whom are immigrants, refugees, working parents, or reentry community members who have been underserved by traditional education systems. The school offers free English language learning, high school diploma programs, and career training at no cost — helping students get jobs, support their families, and contribute to California's economy.

"We recognize the public's interest in our operations — and they are right to demand better," **said Ernie Daniels, Highlands Board Chairman**. "That's why we are turning a new page and ushering in a new era of reform. We are confident Jonathan Raymond is the right choice to lead us through the important work ahead."

Key Reform Actions Underway:

- **Leadership Overhaul:** Appointment of Jonathan Raymond as Executive Director; prior Executive Director removed; and new Board President appointed.

Credentialing Compliance Initiative: In response to retroactive policy shifts, Highlands launched an extensive effort to ensure every teacher meets updated credentialing requirements, including:

- Individualized compliance plans
- New staff dedicated to credentialing support
- A partnership with UMass Global to support intern credential pathways
- Tuition and exam reimbursements for teachers pursuing credentialia

Workforce Restructuring: Downsized staff by more than 80%, issuing over 630 layoff notices to ensure compliance with credentialing laws.

Site Consolidation: Closed 21 campuses where compliance and attendance integrity could not yet be guaranteed; campuses will reopen only when aligned with state law.

Instructional Time Reform: Shifted classroom schedules to ensure attendance is logged five times per day — up from once — in response to audit findings.

Governance and Financial Reform:

- Adopted and revised 133 board policies to strengthen legal, academic, and fiscal operations
- Instituted conflict-of-interest protections, anti-nepotism hiring policies, and competitive vendor selection standards
- Centralized hiring and legal review for all contracts and procurement decisions
- Eliminated travel and incentive spending not directly tied to instruction or compliance

Oversight and Transparency:

- Full cooperation with oversight authorities
- Contracted with Charter Impact, Schoolytics, and legal counsel to enhance fiscal accountability, ADA data accuracy, and long-term sustainability

Community Leaders Speak Out in Support:

"Highlands has helped thousands of immigrants and second-chance learners. With Jonathan Raymond leading reform, I believe this institution can rebuild trust and continue serving our community with excellence."

— **Patrick Kennedy, Sacramento County Supervisor, District 2**

Jonathan Raymond is one of the more thoughtful and committed education leaders I've ever worked with. His focus on our students and protecting taxpayers earned the respect of our parents and community. He led with courage and compassion during his time at Sac City Unified, and I'm confident he will bring that same focus on results and equity to Highlands."

— **Jay Hansen, Former President, Sacramento City Unified School District Board of Trustees**

"At SALAM, we've seen firsthand the impact Highlands has on newly arrived refugees — especially mothers learning English and preparing for employment. The mission of this school matters deeply to our community, and we support the reforms underway to ensure it can continue serving those most in need."

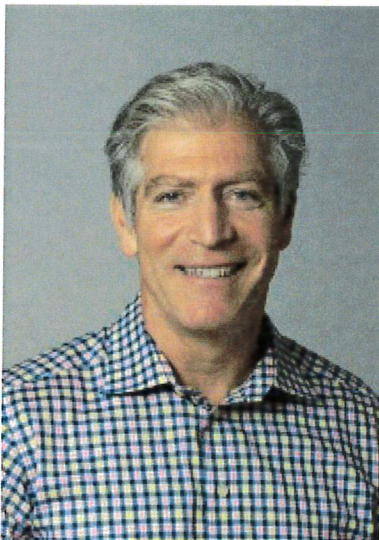
— **Omar MoheyEldin, Chairperson of Board of Trustees, SALAM Islamic Center**

"For over forty-five years, Lao Family Community Development has nurtured and supported the economic mobility and educational attainment of immigrants, refugees and low-income families in California, creating concrete pathways out of poverty to stability and success. Highlands Community Charter has been a key partner in that effort — providing adult learners in our communities with the education, language skills, and job training they need to thrive and contribute to our local economy. The future of our state relies on the contributions of financially self-sufficient families. We support the steps Highlands is taking to rebuild with integrity. We urge our state and local leaders to ensure this vital institution remains open to operate the critical education and training our most vulnerable families need to succeed."

— **Kathy Chao Rothberg, CEO, Lao Family Community Development Center**

"If you care about helping immigrants, refugees and others who need a second chance, and if you care about building California's economy — then you care about saving Highlands," said **Executive Director Raymond**. "We will need the support of our community, our partners in the state and local government, and every person who believes in redemption and opportunity. Together, we can build Highlands back better."

ABOUT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR JONATHAN RAYMOND:



Jonathan Raymond is a nationally respected education leader known for helping institutions navigate moments of deep crisis and emerge stronger, more accountable, and more student-centered.

He most recently served as Senior Vice President and Superintendent in Residence at City Year, a national youth development and education nonprofit, where he oversaw education policy and provided strategic guidance to local and national systems working at the intersection of education, equity, and workforce development.

As the Superintendent of the City School District of New Rochelle, he led the district through the final stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, investing in whole-child supports, accelerating learning recovery, and strengthening school-community partnerships. His leadership prioritized mental health, expanded after-school and summer enrichment, and delivered resources to students most impacted by the pandemic.

Prior to that, Raymond served as Superintendent of Sacramento City Unified School District, where he guided one of California's largest urban districts through historic budget deficits, deep structural reform, and the early stages of a statewide shift toward equity-driven education. Under his leadership, the district raised graduation rates, introduced whole-child supports, launched early learning and summer programs, and transformed some of its most underserved schools into high-performing campuses — all while navigating one of the toughest fiscal climates in California history.

Raymond's crisis-tested leadership is grounded in a lifelong commitment to public service. He previously served as Executive Director of the Massachusetts COVID-19 Relief Fund, Chief Accountability Officer of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina, and President of the Stuart Foundation, California's largest K-12 education philanthropy. He began his career as a labor law attorney and brings legal, nonprofit, and philanthropic expertise to every challenge. He is a graduate of the Broad Superintendents Academy, holds a JD from George Mason University School of Law, an MA from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, and a BA from Tufts University. He also completed the Executive Management Program at Harvard Business School. Throughout his work, Raymond has earned a reputation for putting students first, building trust in fractured environments, and helping systems rise from instability to renewal. As the newly appointed Executive Director of Highlands Community Charter, he brings that same steady hand to a school community that is ready to rebuild and thrive.



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