

South Bay History: San Pedro's POLA High School weathered rocky seas on its road to success

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In the year 2000, San Pedro residents Camilla Townsend and Sandra Bradley began to agitate for the creation of a new charter high school in San Pedro.

San Pedro High School, which opened in 1905, had become overcrowded, and Townsend and Bradley felt its class sizes were too large. (By the year 2005, school enrollment was capped at just under 3,800 students.)



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They pushed for the idea, and found support from then-Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn (now a county supervisor) and Los Angeles Unified School District board member Mike Lansing.

As the movement to start the school grew, its organizers proposed another idea: What if the school offered special courses in international trade and maritime science, using the Port of Los Angeles and its resources as a real-life classroom?

The idea began to gain traction. In 2001, the charter proposal was approved, and the search for grant funding began.

The Port of Los Angeles agreed to lease space to the nascent school in the two-story building that formerly housed the offices of shipping company Evergreen America Corp., 250 W. Fifth St., just east of Centre Street in downtown San Pedro. The port also agreed to provide funding for maritime education as a part of the school's curriculum.

The Harbor Department spent \$5.6 million in October 2002 to purchase from Evergreen a complex of office buildings near the port, in part to create the school.

The port designated one of the buildings for the charter school, while reserving other parts of the Evergreen complex for a new Port Police headquarters and a California Maritime Studies Center.

In 2003, the Port of Los Angeles High School officially became incorporated as a nonprofit charter high school.

Thanks to the hard work of its organizers, the school began to come together in 2005. Teachers were hired and 112 students for its first class were enrolled. Marie Collins was hired as the school's first principal, and Tom Scotti as one of its four teachers.

But bureaucratic red tape and construction delays prevented the Evergreen building from being ready in time for the start of the 2005-2006 school year.

So, when classes began on Sept. 6, 2005, students convened at picnic tables at the Cabrillo Beach camping complex, operated by the Boy Scouts, in San Pedro.

The site wasn't ideal, but students made the best of it for the next few months. On Jan. 9, 2006, they finally finally moved to a new and more permanent location: the first floor of the former Evergreen building. (The second floor was still being renovated.)

Student representatives voted to use "Bears" as their mascot name, so they would be known as the "POLAH Bears."



The POLA High polar bear mascot high-fives girls soccer team players on the pitch after a playoff win in 2012. (Daily Breeze staff file photo)

“I think this is something the port can be very proud of,” Hahn told the assembled residents and dignitaries at the school’s official dedication ceremony on March 31, 2006. The first maritime industry course would be offered in 2007.

POLA High’s early years were fraught with financial struggles, including a large monthly rent bill. By 2008, a deal had been made that would allow the school to buy the property where it was situated — but not until in 2012.



The Port of Los Angeles High School held its first-ever commencement honoring the Class of 2009 at the Warner Grand Theater in San Pedro. (June 12, 2009 Daily Breeze staff file photo)

On June 12, 2009, the school graduated its first class of 89 seniors in ceremonies held at San Pedro's Warner Grand Theatre. The school had become so popular that a lottery system for admission had to be instituted in 2010.



Parents and applicants look on expectantly as numbers are picked in the initial POLA High School enrollment lottery in April 2010. The lotteries continue to be an annual practice. (Daily Breeze staff file photo)

In November 2011, the deal to purchase the 72,000-square-foot building housing POLA High was completed, at a cost of \$4.5 million.

But troubles loomed. Rumblings began in March 2014, when the school's executive director, James Cross, was put on paid leave for a second time. Rumors swirled for months until tensions exploded that October. That's when Tim Scotti, who had become the school's principal in 2007, caused a public outcry when he announced he was resigning his posts over clashes with Cross.



Tom Scotti, then principal of the Port of Los Angeles High School in San Pedro, in 2011. (Daily Breeze staff file photo)

Parents rallied around the beloved Scotti, who agreed to reinstatement in early November.

An official probe revealed that Cross had used school credit cards for personal purchases. He later blamed lax bookkeeping for the appearance of malfeasance. He also agreed to retire as executive director on April 30, 2015.

The controversy eventually died down, and POLA High returned stronger than ever. School test scores continued to rise, and, in May 2015, it was awarded the California State Gold Ribbon Award for academic excellence.

Scotti served as principal until 2017. (George Mora currently holds the post.)

The school had an enrollment of 980 students in 2018, and had a graduation rate of 96 percent between the years 2009 and 2015. Its reputation has made its annual admissions lottery for prospective students a continuing necessity.

In July 2017, the POLA High campus was dedicated to founders Camilla Townsend and Sandy Bradley.

Sources: Daily Breeze files; More San Pedro files; "(Port of Los Angeles High)", National Center for Education Statistics website; "Port of Los Angeles High," School Accountability Report Card Reported Using Data from the 2017—18 School Year, California Department of

Education; Port of Los Angeles High School website.

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