

THE PINER PROSPECTOR

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Piner High School's Unique and Popular Early College Magnet Program Is Facing an Existential Crisis Due To Budget Cuts

By Anahi Moreno, Gael Paramo and Eva Rodriguez

The **Piner High School Early College Magnet Program** may be eliminated next year due to proposed budget cuts by the **Santa Rosa City Schools Board of Education** as part of an effort to reduce a multi-million dollar budget deficit.

Among the positions being eliminated are the Santa Rosa City School's three College and Career Counselors. The cuts would save \$197,000. At Piner, the College and Career Counselor is **Ofelia Reynoso**, who splits her time between Piner and Elsie Allen High School. In addition, **Kristine Erken** has served as the coordinator of the Early College Magnet Program since 2022.



Kristine Erken is the coordinator of Piner's Early College Magnet Program, which serves about 480 students.

The district said after the positions are eliminated a new job description for the classified support will be created. These positions will be assigned to school sites based on the number of students.

"My position as ECM coordinator is rumored to be cut next year," Ms. Erken said in an email. "The assumption is that the district office feels that this job can be absorbed by somebody. That will be impossible."

Ms. Erken said no one will be able to commit the time and energy needed in order to continue to support the 480 students who will be in this program next year.

"This is a full time position that requires a full time person.

If they cut the ECM coordinator position, this program will not make it and the impact on Piner High School will be devastating.”

Piner Principal **Andrea Correia** said Ms. Erken will not be cut from the budget. She is a counselor with seniority. She would be offered into another counseling position

The ECM program “is an integral part of who Piner is,” said Mrs. Correia. “All three of my own children have benefited from the program, and I will do everything I can to justify why having 1 full-time coordinator is so important.”

ECM students were indeed devastated by the news.



Kevin Le, a Piner senior, who earned 97 college credits through the ECM Program.



Fernanda Contreras, a Piner senior, who earned 12 college credits through the ECM Program.

“It’s sad to see them cutting the program that helps the community so much,” said **Kevin Le**, a Piner senior who earned an astonishing 97 college credits through the ECM program. “It’s one of the key things along with the planetarium that make Piner such a destination school. You can’t just remove these programs. They shouldn’t do that.”

According to Ms. Erken, Mr. Le’s 97 college credits are the most ever for a Piner student in the ECM program.

Indeed, Mr. Le credits the program with not only funding those college credits and paying for books and transportation, but also shaping and honing his interest in a range of subjects including economics and engineering.

Now as graduation nears, he hopes to attend one of his three dream schools, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of California at Los Angeles or Yale College.

“I was introduced to the ECM program in 8th grade at Piner Olivet,” Mr. Le said because of the experience of his three older sisters.

His sisters Jessica, Jennifer and Tiffany all took part in ECM and urged him to apply to the ECM program to save money and to find what he wanted to do.

Indeed, he said a course he took at the Santa Rosa JC called Introduction to Career Development was critical to finding his interest in aerospace/mechanical engineering.

"They help you find what you want to do," he said.

To be sure, earning 97 college credits also will save "a lot of money," he said.

He has enough credits to start college as an 18 year old junior; however, he plans to attend for the full four years.

"It's a huge problem that the district is considering budget cuts that affect the ECM program," said **Fernanda Contreras**, a senior at Piner, who has earned about 12 college credits during her three and half years at Piner.

"ECM opened so many doors for me on my educational journey. I'm honestly concerned for new students. They're not going to have as many doors open to them as we had."

Like Mr. Le, Ms. Contreras interest in the ECM grew out of the experience of seven of her cousins, who all participated in the program and went on to continue their education.

Ms. Contreras said she appreciated the flexibility that the ECM program offered. She was able to take classes online, which was essential due to her family situation.

That flexibility allowed her to dedicate some of her time to other things besides academics such as cross country and track.

"It was huge in terms of making me a well rounded person."

If she had to do it all over again, Ms. Contreras said she would have taken even more classes through the ECM program.

"I tried to maintain a healthy work/life balance, but I could have done a little more."

Ms. Contreras has already been accepted at Sacramento State and San Francisco State but is hoping to get into the University of California at Berkeley. She plans to study history or legal studies and eventually pursue a law degree.

The Origin of ECM

With the ECM Program facing an existential crisis, it's worth considering its origins and what it was trying to accomplish.

“The Early College Magnet (ECM) program was created out of a desire to provide students with meaningful access to college-level coursework while they were still in high school,” said **Craig Wycoff**, a former teacher and vice principal at Piner as well as a proud Piner graduate.

“A few years earlier, I had taught a student who, remarkably, graduated from high school one day later from graduating from Santa Rosa Junior College. That student’s journey stayed with me and inspired me to find a way to make a similar pathway available to more students.”

Mr. Wycoff said while he “helped lead the effort to create the ECM program, it was very much a team endeavor. Staff at Piner High School, Santa Rosa Junior College, and the Santa Rosa City Schools district office all played critical roles.

He said the final decision to move forward was made by the Santa Rosa City Schools Board of Education and Santa Rosa Junior College.

Together, the boards provided funding for an ECM program coordinator, a part-time counselor at both Piner and SRJC, as well as books, tuition, and transportation for students.



Craig Wycoff, the former vice principal who helped start the ECM Program.

“Before launching the first cohort, we spent a significant amount of time recruiting students and explaining the program to parents, guardians, and SRJC staff,” Mr. Wycoff said. “Some parents were understandably concerned about their children traveling to Santa Rosa Junior College, and some SRJC staff questioned whether 11th-grade students would be successful in college-level courses. Marketing a program that had never existed before required extensive outreach and communication.”

The first ECM program “set a cap of 100 students for the incoming class and successfully met that goal in the first year,” Mr. Wycoff said.

He said overall, the first year went surprisingly smoothly.

“Because the initial ECM students were freshmen, SRJC instructors came to Piner to teach classes on campus. This approach gave us two additional years to refine and plan the program before those students became juniors and began taking classes at SRJC.”

Mr. Wycoff began his career as a teacher at Arroyo Grande High School, in a small coastal town near San Luis Obispo, where he taught for four years. In 1988, he took a teaching position at Piner High School and remained in the classroom until 2005.

After that, he transitioned into an administrative role.

“Over the years, I worked closely with teachers, counselors, classified staff, district personnel, and administrators, all of whom played an important role in supporting students and shaping the school community.”

In addition to Piner High School, he has served as an administrator at Maria Carrillo High School and later at Calistoga Junior/Senior High School.

“I believe the ECM program made a significant impact on students' lives. It allowed them to explore new courses not typically offered in high school, while also earning both high school and college credits simultaneously. This helped them save money on tuition, setting them up for future success. I've heard of students who graduated from Piner High School's ECM program and completed their bachelor's degree in just three years—transferring to four-year colleges with a full year of college credits already earned.”

Piner's Grace Program Is Facing the Loss of Its Beloved Counselor Johana Perdomo Due to Budget Cuts by Board of Education

By Gian Almorado and Marcos Espinoza

Piner High School's Grace Program, the alternative education program that is the envy of schools across Sonoma County, is facing the loss of its beloved Grace Counselor **Johana Perdomo**, who more than anyone else, is responsible for the program's success, and likely the elimination of the program itself, due to budget cuts.

Ms. Perdomo is one of five Multi-Tiered System of Supports counselors being eliminated by the board to save \$842,063 a year. The elimination of the MTSS counselor positions is one of many proposed by the board on Friday, Jan. 23 in order to cut millions of dollars in expenses to reduce a multi-million dollar budget deficit.



Johana Perdomo, the Grace counselor at Piner for the last four years.

“It is heartbreaking to think about the Grace program being cut,” said Ms. Perdomo. “These students deserve a second chance, along with the specialized support and guidance that the program provides.”

Indeed, she said the Grace students at Piner “need stability and trusted relationships, and we should be given the support to continue serving them here, rather than forcing them to transfer to Ridgway, adult school, or, worst of all, risk dropping out entirely. “

To be sure, the elimination of Ms. Perdomo's position is also Piner's loss and especially the Grace Program's loss.

She is responsible for recruiting and counseling about 60 Grace Program students every year. This year her job was made even harder when the board asked her to split her time between Piner and **Elsie Allen High School**.

If the Grace Program is eliminated it will be a terrible day for the students who count on its support to get them back on track in their academic pursuits, regain credits and graduate on time.

Indeed, the Grace Program is one reason why Piner leads all area high schools in graduation rates. Without the program, Piner's graduation rate may fall sharply.

Ms. Perdomo said because Piner Principal **Andrea Correia** believes in the Grace Program it may survive in some reduced capacity though how effective it will be in the future is an open question.

"The GRACE Program at Piner High School is an example of who we want our students to be: resilient, gritty, and hard-working," said Mrs. Correia in an email. "Unfortunately, our district is in a financial situation where reductions need to be made. How those reductions impact schools at this time is unknown. However, as the lead site administrator at Piner, I will do my best to shield our students as much as possible from those reductions."

Piner describes its Grace Program as a "unique program on the Piner High School campus, to help students get back on track to succeed and graduate.

Through Grace, students are able to earn credits that were missed during previous school years with academic support, small group setting, and advocacy.

To get into the Grace Program, students must be referred by their counselors and be interviewed and approved by the Grace counselor.

To stay in good standing, students must be attending school 85% of the time, have no discipline incidents, and be making an effort during the time frame that their application is being considered.

In order to stay in the program, Grace students also must be respectful of Grace Teachers, Counselor, and Peers, be making progress toward graduation, bring their chromebook for classwork and use cellphones only when permitted by teachers.

"If a student doesn't meet the goals listed above, they will be dropped from the Grace Program and enrolled back in Piner High School classes."

Piner's Grace Program has been so successful that other schools in Sonoma County have visited with teachers to talk about their successes and challenges. Indeed, teachers and counselors from Carpe Diem High School, San Antonio High School, and Sonoma Mountain High School, all alternative high schools in Petaluma, met with Grace teachers last fall.

Grace students expressed deep sadness that Ms. Perdomo's position was being eliminated and that the program itself might be as well.

"I really hope Ms. Perdomo can stay and they can work things out because she is the reason why I am able to graduate and graduate with more credits," said **Jocelyn Sevilla**, a senior at Piner. Ms. Perdomo "is also a big reason why I am doing better in school," she said.

Ms Perdomo "makes you feel comfortable and okay. She makes Grace feel welcoming to new students who come like me. This is my first year here and I have enjoyed it so much and the main reason was because of Ms. Perdomo.

"This is one of the best years I have ever had out of my whole four years of high school and the reason behind that is because of Ms. Perdomo," she added. "She is someone I am going to miss once I leave high school because of the impact she has made in my life."

Alyssa Correia, another senior, said Grace was truly the best thing that has happened to her in her high school career.

"I did terribly my freshman year. Never came to school, rarely did the work, I didn't care at all about school, until I had the opportunity to join Grace."

"Not only did I get the opportunity to join Grace, I was also given the opportunity to meet Ms. Perdomo," she said. "Without Ms. Perdomo and the Grace program, I would not be walking the stage in 4 months."

"Every student should have this opportunity. Grace should be expanding, not being taken away."

Piner's New Tardy Policy Seen as Not Really Solving the Problem

By Evelyn Sanchez and Alexandra Hicks

Piner High School unveiled a new tardy policy at the beginning of the Spring semester requiring students who show up late to class by more than 15 minutes to head to the office for a tardy pass.

So far the new policy doesn't seem to be pleasing anyone, teachers or students.

In early January, Principal **Andrea Correia** sent out a letter to parents and students laying out the case for the new policy, which she said has become necessary.

Dear Piner Students and Families,

We are writing to address an ongoing concern that has significantly increased this school year—tardiness to class. Being on time is a basic expectation at Piner High School, and it is essential to maintaining a positive, respectful, and productive learning environment.

We understand that sometimes life happens. Occasional delays due to unforeseen circumstances are a reality, and we approach those situations with understanding and compassion. However, excessive and ongoing tardiness has become a serious issue, and it must stop.

Effective immediately, any student who arrives more than 15 minutes late to class will be sent to the Attendance Office to obtain a tardy pass before being admitted to class. Students will need to wait in line to receive this pass, which will likely result in them missing even more instructional time.

Constant interruptions from late arrivals disrupt the flow of instruction, take valuable time away from teaching and learning, and require teachers to spend a large portion of the period making attendance corrections instead of delivering lessons. This directly impacts the quality of education for all students.

Students are responsible for being at school and in class on time—every day and every period. Being punctual is an important life skill that reflects responsibility, respect, and readiness to learn.

Parents and guardians, we ask for your support in reinforcing the importance of arriving at school and class on time. Please talk with your student about planning ahead, arriving early, and making punctuality a priority.

Thank you for partnering with us to ensure Piner High School remains a focused, respectful, and successful learning environment.

*Sincerely,
Mrs. Correia
Principal, Piner High School*

To put the tardy problem in perspective, Vice Principal **Ryan Partika** provided statistics showing 196 freshmen have 13 or more tardies this year. That compares with 173 sophomores with 13 or more, 171 juniors and 121 seniors.

Piner teachers and students couldn't seem to agree on whether the policy was warranted or went far enough.

"Yes, I believe tardies are a real problem at Piner," said **Mark Mantoani**, who chairs the Science Department.

"To be fair, every school and district has challenges, and tardies have been an issue at many over the years. The problem is not new.

Mr. Mantoani said his wife, who is also a teacher, remembers changes in her high school tardy policy at James Logan High School in Union City in the 80's, because too many students were coming late to class.

"The issue, in my mind, is the response to the tardies observed. I do believe that schools today (some more than others) have their hands tied in many ways. They want to be able to address the issue but cannot hold students accountable in a meaningful way."

He said "it used to be that loss of class hours (time) resulted in loss of credits. That is no longer the case. There is no detrimental outcome or punishment for missing class. There are some natural consequences of course, but this is left to students, many of whom are making bad choices, and missing significant class time."

Additionally, he said schools like Piner are reluctant to try to punish students with consequences like detentions, because they cannot suspend for missing class time, if students do not attend these detentions.

"It's effectively illegal, and districts will not support schools with these consequences because they cannot legally. We are left to get creative with solutions, and so far, we don't seem willing to do much."

For his part, Mr. Mantoani said the 15 minute rule seems only a mild deterrent to students.

"Most of my tardies occur within the first 10-15 minutes of class anyway, so I still am making many adjustments to my roll, playing attendance clerk, instead of focusing on teaching."

He said the new policy "will just lead to students learning that being up to 15 minutes late is simply acceptable behavior, and it's not."

Mr. Mantoani called tardiness a "learned behavior."

"Some students who are not typically late at the beginning of the year are learning that they can be late, with no consequences, at this point in the year, and they are making that choice."

Other teachers also said they agreed Piner had a chronic tardy problem.

"Piner's absence and tardy problem is a 9 out of 10," said **Russell Olson**, a Math teacher at Piner. "It might only be a minute to 5 minutes but it occurs too often."

For his part, Mr. Olson said the new policy is not strict enough and it is not working.

"The walk to the office is the only punishment. Unfortunately, like most situations you have to take something away from the person to get them to change. Detention at lunch or after school."

He said a shorter threshold for sending students to get a tardy slip "might help, but I doubt it. The fact that it is in place students probably push the limit on purpose. It is only a tardy. It would be nice if students had a better attitude towards discipline and responsibility, but that starts with the student and the parents."

"The tardy issue is problematic, but it depends on the class (at least that's what I have observed)," said **Jen Griffiths**, an English teacher at Piner.

"Fifteen minutes is pretty generous and I think some students take advantage of that. For instance, I have 2 students during 5th period that use it for an 'extended' lunch break. That said, I have seen improvement with some students.

Ms. Griffiths said maybe 7 or 10 mins would be more appropriate. 'Tardy sweeps' happening more often would be a deterrent as well," she added.

Students also agreed that tardiness at Piner was a chronic problem that needs to be addressed.

Piner does have a chronic tardy problem because " people want to skip class," said **Kamaya George**, a 9th grader. "The whole point of the policy is to be a punishment, but people don't care. It would be better if teachers marked them absent if they are 15 or more minutes late."

Diana Arreotua and **Lianna Guzman**, both 9th graders said the new policy was fair.

"The new policy is fair because when you're late you have to go wait in the office and to wait even more time in the long line just to get a tardy slip," said Ms. Arreotua. "It is just like a consequence."

Similarly, Ms. Guzman said the new tardy policy is a good idea because it makes the kids that are late wait in the long line for a tardy slip.

"After they wait in the line they will remember not to be late for the next time."

For her part, Mrs. Correia signaled that further changes on the school tardy policy are coming in the 2026-2027 school year.

"Students should prepare themselves," Mrs. Correia said. "Next year there will be no 15-minute grace period, and all students who are not in class and ready to go will need to go to the attendance office for a tardy pass after the bell. No exceptions."

Piner Varsity Boys Football Stars Earn Well Deserved Trip to the League All Star Game and a Possible Future Career in Coaching

By Gian Almorado

Piner High School's Varsity Boys Football standouts **Jarod Fata** and **Sokhayne "Soso" Prak** made the All Star team this year and may have found a future career as well.

The two seniors were selected by coaches to play in the Boys Varsity Football All Star Game on Saturday Jan 10 at 3 pm at Casa Grande High School in Petaluma. The game features seniors from North Bay schools and honors players for their impact on and off the field.

Soso Prak was Piner's starting quarterback and a team leader. He said being named an All Star was "exciting and joyful" and also "very humbling."

As part of the event each player brings a new backpack for foster kids in the Bay Area and Mr. Prak said he liked "the opportunity to give back."

Mr. Prak said football "meant everything" to him and helped him feel welcomed when he first arrived at Piner.

Coach Adam Rosenstein said Mr. Prak was "the glue of the team" and added that "there is a reason he was a first team all league defensive back."

Mr. Fata was the leader of Piner's defensive line and was known for his leadership. He said being nominated "goes to show my hard work has been visible to my coaches and other people around Santa Rosa."

Mr. Fata plans to study kinesiology and hopes to play football in college before returning to Piner to coach. "Being a leader runs in my lineage," Fata said, explaining that his father **Ronnie Fata** is a chief in a village in Samoa.

Coach Rosenstein said "Jarod was our heartbeat on defense" and added that he was a player who could take over games and would "eventually be a coach someday."

Both players said they are proud to represent Piner one last time and share a strong bond after playing together for four years. "Me and Sokhayne have been playing together for 4 years," Fata said. As they head into the All Star Game Mr. Prak and Mr. Fata are closing on chapter while already looking ahead to a future in coaching football.

Piner High School's New Varsity Boys Basketball Coach Vixay Chantha Is Trying to Build a Team With Heart From Scratch

By Gian Almorado and Marcos Espinoza

The **Piner High School Varsity Boys Basketball Team's** new coach **Vixay Chantha** has been working to build his first season around more than just numbers, but around effort, growth, and togetherness.

This year the Prospectors are working hard to improve their 8-16 record, showing persistence through a long winter season.

Coach V shared his goals for the team, saying, "Honestly, my biggest goal is that these kids can walk away knowing they gave everything they had. Wins matter, sure, but what matters more is effort, growth, and how they showed up for each other."

The coach also pointed to growth in maturity: "Now I see kids communicating, holding each other accountable, and responding to adversity in a completely different way." He emphasized that team chemistry fuels skill development: "When players trust each other and care about one another, skill development follows."

Several players are helping define this year's squad. Including senior guard **Davelle Jeffries**, senior forward/center **Ariel Orozco**, senior guard **Danny Orozco**, and senior point guard **SoSo Prak**. Others like **Irving Cano** and **Camden Brasil** have stepped in to contribute hard-nosed defense and energy.

The Prospectors faced injuries and tough losses throughout the season, but Coach Chantha said he was most proud of how the team responded: "They showed up, worked harder, and leaned on each other instead of pointing fingers."

Heart and resilience are also evident in players who have grown into leadership roles. Coach Chantha remarked, "Some lead with their voice, some with their actions," especially praising those who support teammates even when it's not in the spotlight.

One of the season's most memorable wins came when the Prospectors battled back from a

deficit to top the Redwood Christian team, 50-28, showing they can finish strong even after falling behind early.

Looking ahead, Mr. Chantha offered advice for younger players: “Show up ready to work. Be coachable. Put the team first.” His motivation isn’t just about basketball, it’s about shaping young men prepared for success after high school.

“What keeps me motivated... is helping develop the leaders of tomorrow,” Mr. Chantha said. “Knowing I can play even a small role in that growth is what makes coaching so meaningful to me.”

Blinky Follows in Max's Footsteps as Piner’s Latest Furry Mascot

By Xavier Coello, Jackeline Cruz, Sophia Rodriguez

Since the passing of **Piner High School's** beloved unofficial mascot, **Max the cat**, a new feline presence has been felt on campus. An orange domestic shorthair cat with a missing left eye and a slight limp on his back right foot, named Blinky, has quickly captured the hearts of students and staff alike.

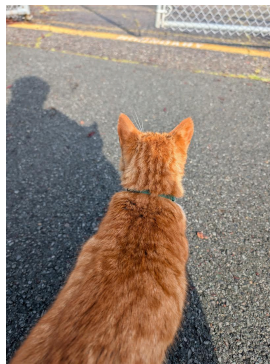
Blinky, who has been living with his caretaker **Peg Marcom** on Jenes Lane for about four years, has become a familiar sight around the campus. His friendly demeanor and playful spirit have made him a welcome addition to the Piner community.

“Blinky has a unique charm that draws people in,” said Ms. Marcom. “He is a cheerful and happy cat.”

Friends of Blinky on Piner’s campus might have noticed his limp.



Blinky submitting to a headlock.



Blinky gazing at a shadow.



Blinky seeking counsel from Ms. Perdomo

“He does have a strange gait and lifts his right rear leg higher than would seem normal, but he can run very well and doesn't seem to be in any pain,” Ms. Marcom said.

Having been rescued from the streets, Blinky's journey to finding a loving home wasn't without its challenges.

"I was told that before he came to us he was living on the street somewhere and was turned into animal services", Ms. Marcom said.

Despite his past, Blinky has adapted well to his new life and is known for his affectionate nature.

"He loves to purr and 'hummmms' his meows," Ms. Marcom said.

Long Live Blinky

At Piner High School, head custodian **Antonio Chavez** has made it his mission to ensure the safety and well being of Blinky and the other cats that roam the campus.

"I always told the custodians to watch out for cats in classrooms," Mr. Chavez said, emphasizing the importance of keeping these creatures safe.

"I've asked Blinky's caretaker, Ms. Marcom, to notify me immediately if Blinky ever goes missing," said Mr. Chavez, highlighting his protective approach.

"Blinky gives me mixed feelings in a good way," said Mr. Chavez. "I feel really good seeing him and at the same time I feel sad. I know he's probably still looking for his brother Max. I love to see him. He reminds me of Max from far away."

Beyond his custodial duties, Mr. Chavez is dedicated to creating a nurturing environment for all animals on site. His commitment to the cats at Piner reflects a deep sense of responsibility and care for the well being of every creature that calls the school home.

"I really don't know Blinky but I do know that the neighborhood/Piner cats are loved by all and provide a calming effect on those who see them," said **Kurt Kruger**, a science teacher at Piner. "It offers a point of connection to those who interact with the kitties too."

Johana Perdomo, the Grace counselor at Piner High School, said "Blinky has been a blessing given to us from our little Gracie 'Max.' He reminds me so much of Gracie. When he sees me walking he prances straight to me. I love hearing his little bell around his neck as he visits students in the Grace quad."

"I was sad that Max died but I'm glad that there is a new cat," said **Eduardo Lojas**, a senior at Piner. "But blinky could never be Max, but his successor."

"Blinky is a nice and gentle cat, also he loves cuddling," said **Ryan Pattie**, a freshman at Piner. "Max loved to be pet, but Max didn't like cuddling."

"Blinky is a very good boy and I love him very much," said **Sarah Kanga-Livinstone**, a science teacher at Piner.

"He's a smelly boy and he likes to roll around on the pavement," Ms. Kanga-Livinstone added. "I would encourage all students to brush him out so he's less stinky."

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