

THE PINER PROSPECTOR

Volume II

February 27, 2026

Piner High Students See Overzealous, Aggressive Immigration Enforcement as a Personal Affront to Them and Their Families

By Inoke Seviua, Gian Almorado and Marcos Espinoza

For many students at **Piner High School**, the national strike against Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) on Friday Feb. 6 wasn't just a news story. It was personal. It was real. It was their families, their communities, and their everyday lives.

Brandon Foster, a junior, stayed home from school to participate.



Piner junior Brandon Foster



Piner junior Yami Alcazar

"This wasn't a rushed or careless decision," Mr. Foster said. "I kept the news on for most of the day so I could understand what was happening and why so many people were involved."

Staying home was his way of participating in a peaceful protest and exercising his right to strike.

"The day was more than missing school. It was about learning, reflecting, and understanding the world beyond the classroom."

For many students, the strike was deeply personal. **Yami Alcazar**, a junior, lost her father to deportation when she was just two.

"ICE tears families apart," Ms. Alcazar said. "Some of my family members don't have papers, which is scary knowing they might be gone someday. Even those of us who were born here can get taken away just for not being white."

Alyssa Correa, a senior, spoke of her father's hard work and what it meant for her family.



Piner senior Alyssa Correa



Piner senior Jocelyn Sevilla

"We aren't 'aliens,' we're humans," Ms. Correa said. "My dad being an immigrant made a great life for me and my sisters. Somehow, an immigrant working, or just walking the streets, is a threat to the U.S."

Fear is part of daily life for many students.

"People are scared to go outside because of the chances of ICE taking them," said **Jocelyn Sevilla**, a senior. "Innocent people are being harmed. Families are being separated. All the people who have died in ICE custody didn't get a chance to see their families."

Some Piner students said the controversy over ICE caused tension in their own homes and families.

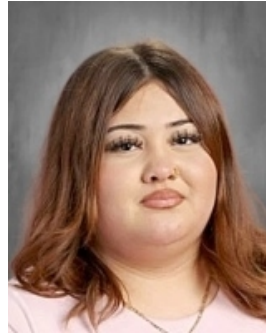
"It makes me really uncomfortable when my father says hurtful things about my mom's side of the family," said **Anaya Hammond**, a Piner senior. "My biggest fear is randomly hearing that one of my closest family members won't be able to make it home."

Students highlighted the essential contributions of immigrants to the United States.

"Immigrants made the house you rest your head in every night," said **America Lopez**, a junior. "They picked the fruits and vegetables you need to be well and fed. We are not 'aliens.' Immigrants work just as hard as everyone else, if not more."



Piner senior Anaya Hammond



Piner junior America Lopez

Other students stressed the unfairness of a system that stresses borders over humanity.

“Borders are made by governments, but people are people everywhere,” said **Yasmin Ballinas**, a Piner senior. “Where someone is born should not decide what rights they have. Crossing a border does not make someone less human.”



Piner senior Yasmin Ballinas



Piner junior Gilberto Morales

Some acknowledged the complexity of border enforcement but emphasized the human cost.

“Deportations are about enforcing immigration laws, but they can break up families, affect people who’ve lived in the U.S. for years, or send people back to unsafe situations,” said **Gilberto Morales**, a Piner junior. “The system often feels too harsh and inconsistent. Families should be protected, not torn apart.”

Other students expressed anger and urgency. **Katrina Sblendorio**, a senior, called ICE a “secret police” and compared their actions to the Gestapo.

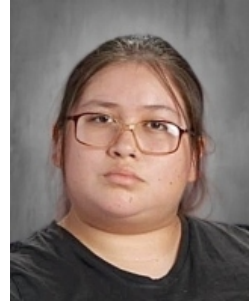
“Innocent people are dying at the hands of these officers,” Ms. Sblendorio said. “We cannot stand by and allow it to continue.”



Piner senior Katrina Sblendorio



Piner senior Yadira Lopez



Piner senior Rosa Ortega

Rosa Ortega, a Piner senior, lamented the stories of people being dragged from cars, held in cells for hours without medical attention, and released to hospitals afterward.

“No one is safe,” Ms. Ortega said. “People are being hurt, and families are being torn apart.”

Yadira Lopez, a senior, spoke about resilience and hope.

“We are not ‘aliens.’ We are human beings who came here to live the American Dream. Our people are brave for starting over, for learning new languages, and building new lives from the ground up. We are hardworking, showing up every day, doing the jobs that keep this country moving, and giving back to our communities.”



Piner junior Edwin Dominguez

Edwin Dominguez, a junior, shared frustration at the cruelty he’s witnessed online.

“They are separating families and even kids. I don’t see how anyone could side with ICE or even like what they do.”

Many students see the protests against ICE as a much needed call to action.

“The only thing more powerful than hate is love,” said Ms. Lopez. “We should all join together and project our voices, peacefully.”

For these students, the strike wasn't just about missing a day of school. It was about paying attention, speaking up, and standing with families and communities. It was about noticing the world, understanding it, and refusing to stay silent.

–with reporting by **Angel Mondragon**.

Piner Social Studies Teacher Sees Parallels Between ICE and Nazi Germany, Urges Santa Rosa School Board to Protect Students

By Sophia Rodriguez

Piner High School Social Studies Teacher **Heather Benson**, who is famous for teaching about the Holocaust, sees many parallels between what happened in Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s and what is happening today in the United States.

Ms. Benson has become an advocate for her students at Piner, many of whom come from immigrant families and have mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers who are facing arrest and deportation at the hands of President Trump's U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

With that as background, on Friday February 2, Ms. Benson testified before the Santa Rosa City School Board that the district needed to do more to safeguard schools from ICE activity and protect students from arrest.

"I have been a teacher in the Santa Rosa City Schools for 18 years," Ms. Benson testified.

"For more than two decades I have taught about genocide and told my students never again. Yet it happens again and again and again. I have often thought of the good German teachers, the teachers who watched their students sent to death camps and said nothing."

In her testimony, Ms. Benson asked the board "to take a stand and declare you will support your students and staff and community and protect us from ICE."

She warned that the board's "current policy, though well intentioned, does not reflect the reality that no one will bring warrants or follow the constitution when they come to our town."

"I appreciate you have thought about it in advance and have come up with an independent study packet to allow students to go into hiding, but what if they come to our school? Will you stand with me? I will put my body on the line. Will you join me? Thank you."

Asked whether the school board has responded to her request, Ms. Benson said "yes."

The school board released an updated policy on February 11, "however, their response does not go very far," she said.

The board's new policy is still dependent on the belief that the laws being upheld are just and should be obeyed.

"Unfortunately, everything that Hitler did was legal in Nazi Germany too, so hearing that people are still willing to obey an unjust law is disheartening."

Ms. Benson said she has not had any personal experience with ICE, though one of her students was deported in 2021 "when we were learning on Zoom and I couldn't do anything to help. I still wonder about them."

Ms. Benson said she has taught about the Holocaust for most of her career and is deeply familiar with it.

"It is deeply painful to me that people do not learn the lessons of the past. As a teacher I have had the honor of meeting Holocaust survivors and their families. It was moving and powerful."

Based on her knowledge of the history of the Holocaust, Ms. Benson said she fears "that ICE will operate with impunity and without regard for Constitutional rights, natural rights, or the writ of habeas corpus."

Moreover, she asserted that "if people die in custody or are greatly harmed physically or emotionally, there is no recourse in our justice system that can restore someone's life to them."

Although she hopes that ICE may be held accountable someday, that is poor comfort to people whose rights are violated.

"ICE has been given an incredibly large budget by a bipartisan Congress to acquire warehouses to keep people imprisoned indefinitely, for profit," Ms. Benson said.

She noted that the federal government is also issuing contracts to hire teachers to teach children detained in these camps because their detentions will be longer than allowed by law, typically 20 days.

"If ICE ignores all court orders and has an unlimited budget and the support of the executive branch and the legislative branch then ICE can do whatever they like."

While Ms. Benson doubts the school board's new policy will really protect students in a meaningful way, she said she continues to speak out to people she knows.

"I have contacted my elected officials. I have attended protests."

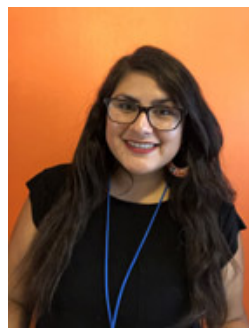
She cautioned, however, that students especially should be aware that protesting is more dangerous than people in the United States may expect.

With Grace Program Facing Elimination, Grace Counselor Johana Perdomo Urges Grace Juniors to Work Hard to Finish Cyber High

By Evelyn Sanchez and Gael Paramo

Piner High School's beloved Grace Counselor **Johana Perdomo**, who is sadly likely to lose her job due to a \$15 million budget deficit in the Santa Rosa City Schools District, is still working hard to prepare her students for next year when they won't have the Grace Program to rely on.

"I am disheartened to hear that the Grace Program might go away as a consequence of the \$15 million district deficit," Ms. Perdomo said. "It is an amazing program that has supported many students throughout the years."



**Grace Counselor
Johana Perdomo**

Indeed the Grace program supports students who either feel disconnected from school, fall through the cracks, or have barriers in the way of their education. Without this program these higher need students would be placed in large classes and have less access to support.

If the program goes away students who are behind in credits will either have to transfer to the continuation high school- Ridgeway, drop out, or find other programs outside of the school district.

"The current Grace students will lose the extra support and community that nurtured their new success in school. Piner has always prided itself on being able to support all different types of students without having to push them out, unfortunately now the district is making it challenging for Piner to keep the program as is."

At the moment, Ms. Perdomo said she is working with Grace juniors to encourage them to not only pass all of their classes but having them finish their Cyber High courses.

She said students tend to wait until senior year to complete their Cyber High and if the program is cut and if she is no longer at Piner she wants to make sure they have all their credits set.

"There are also some students that I am encouraging them to consider attending Ridgeway at least," she said. "These students are more credit deficient and it would be challenging for them to finish without the additional credit recovery that Grace offers."

Ms. Perdomo's position as MTSS Counselor was officially cut on February 11 along with other counselor positions and support staff.

She said she will not know until March 13th if she will receive a "RIF" (Reduction in Force - cut labor expenses).

"If I get a notice that means I will have to look at other options and if I don't get one that means that I will just be working at a different school," she said.

Unfortunately other districts are also facing low enrollment and budget cuts so there aren't many School Counseling positions.

"If I cannot work as a school counselor I plan on working on my hours to become a Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor (LPCC). I am grateful that I decided to complete the dual program (school counseling and LPCC) for my masters at University of San Francisco."

Grace students said they were very saddened to learn that the Grace program was being eliminated and heaped praise on Ms. Perdomo for her commitment to them.

"If Grace ends up getting taken away from students many won't have the support they need or get the support they need from their teachers or counselor," said **Rosa Ortega**, a senior.

"Grace isn't like Ridgeway at all. At Ridgeway they don't care if you do the work or not, but here in Grace they do. They push you more. All the Grace teachers want the best for their students. They want them to graduate with the rest, not stay behind. These teachers push you more to your limits because they know you can do more than you want to."

Ms. Perdomo "is the best counselor anyone could have," said Ms. Ortega.

"She helped me with my hardest moments in life. She truly is amazing, and she is amazing at her job. She is funny and kind and well she's EVERYTHING!!!"

Ms. Ortega said Ms. Perdomo "goes far beyond for her students, providing things we need, making plans with us (like going on field trips). Helping her students with opportunities. Making them feel safe letting them be themselves around her. She is the kind of counselor everyone wishes to have in high school.

"For me she's my comfort. Her office is my safe space which is hard to have in high school. If I didn't have her as my counselor I'd probably be in Ridgeway. And not caring about my education."

Piner High School Girls Basketball Team Made the Playoffs By Following Coach Bo Reece's Focus on Family Dynamic

By Eva Rodriguez and Anahi Moreno

The Piner High School Girls Basketball Team, under second year Head Coach **Robert "Bo" Reece**, stresses a family approach to the game and long season in order for a young team to overcome injuries, inexperience and show its resilience and mettle.

Although the team's league record was 4 wins and 6 losses and their overall record 8 wins and 7 losses, the girls still made the playoffs in division 4 in NCS. In the NCS playoffs, the team fell to **Marin Academy** 34-22.

"We're not just the basketball team, we're more of a family," Coach Reece said. The team worked to build team chemistry by team bonding without basketball being the subject. Their team bonding involved things like park cleanups, cleaning out the concession stands together just to have a family bond.

"This year's team started to commit a lot more compared to last year," Coach Reece said.

Indeed he said the team has worked hard to build a foundation and what he likes to think of as a family dynamic.

"I look for girls who are leaders not followers," Coach Reece said. Players "who are vocal not just at practice but in games as well. Girls who aren't afraid to step up to a challenge. Girls who truly want to play, not just because friends are playing."

If a player can't meet the team's family standard she will no longer be on the team, the coach said.

Unfortunately, the team caught the injury bug during the regular season, with sophomore **Aaliyah Reece**, the coach's daughter, playing for much of the season with a fractured right foot.

The team also felt unfairly targeted by referees during some games.

"I was trying to coach the girls without getting a technical for it," Coach Reece said. "A lot of injuries this year and having targets by the refs" was a big challenge for his team.

If any player seemed upset or felt down, Coach Reece urged the other players to check in with them and then cheer them on.

To prepare for playoffs, Coach Reece cut physical practices from 2 hours to 1 hour then required the players to study game films.

The change helped the girls learn how to take care of the ball better and reduced turnovers. It also helped them learn how to box out opposing offenses and rebound.

The girls also worked on their free throws.

During games when the girls were feeling pressure, Coach Reece urged them to “relax, let the game come to them.” He also urged them to cheer the players on during the game to reduce some of the pressure.

The coach was always quick to point out the importance of players being flexible.

“If you feel you’re not shooting well then be the best rebounder of that game,” he said. “If you feel you’re struggling on the offense, go down and play defense.”

The coach said one of his “biggest pet peeves is when he asks someone if they’re ready to go in and they shrug their shoulders or they say ‘yea’ but then won’t play properly.”

Sophomore **Cambria Weerts** stood out because she worked on her game, meaning she would be in the gym before practice and would stay after it ended just shooting around.

This year Ms. Weerts’ hard work turned into 120 points for the who season versus just 20 points a year ago.

The coach said other standouts included freshman **Camilla San Roman**, for her devotion to practice and work on the fundamentals of the game, senior **Amie Alvarez**, for scoring 19 points and 8 rebounds in one game.

At the beginning of the season Coach Reece and the girls set a goal of making the playoffs and they did just that.

For next year’s season, Coach Reece said he will challenge the team to play more schools during preseason compared to this year.

After the team develops more confidence, he wants the team to play **Maria Carrillo High School, Rancho Cotati High School** and eventually league powerhouse **Cardinal Newman High School**.

“But with the group we have, the girls here and the JV girls that played last year I think within a year we’ll be able to hang with all the teams.”

Piner High School’s Black Students Union Caps off Successful Black History Month With Showing of Film ‘Black Panther’

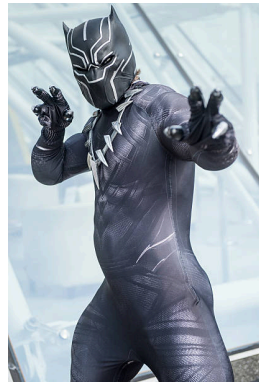
By Yaretzy Sedano

Piner High School's Black Student Union held a well-attended showing of the popular and critically acclaimed black superhero film **"Black Panther"** on Friday February 27 in the multipurpose room.

The movie showing came at the end of a month-long celebration of Black History for Piner's **Black History Month**, which also included poetry readings, public service announcements etc. The movie showing event was attended by BSU students from Piner and BSU students from **Santa Rosa High School, Montgomery High School, Analy High School** and **Maria Carrillo High School**.

"We love doing this and seeing the kids have something to do instead of going downtown and hanging out at the transit and all that stuff...or maybe getting into trouble," said **Robert "Bo" Reece**, a Piner student safety advisor and advisor to the Black Student Union.

"We'd rather be here like a family, having a good time. It was fun."



Black Panther

Given the success of the event, the BSU is "already kind of brainstorming" future events, Mr. Reece said..

"Maybe we should do a movie night once a month," Mr. Reece said. "Try to do like a BSU movie next month, once a month. All right? Maybe not with the same level of food. We probably won't do a full meal every time. Right. But like candy popcorn, people can hang out with me."

The BSU chose "'Black Panther' because it's the most successful black superhero movie in history," said **Erik Klouse**, a special education teacher and advisor to the BSU.

Black Panther was directed by **Ryan Coogler** and starred **Chadwick Boseman, Michael B. Jordan** and **Lupita Nyong'o**.

According to a synopsis of the movie, which is based on the **Marvel Comic**, Black Panther tells the origin story of T'Challa, a.k.a. Black Panther.

"After the death of his father, T'Challa returns home to the African nation of Wakanda to take his rightful place as king. When a powerful enemy suddenly reappears, T'Challa's mettle as king -- and as Black Panther -- gets tested when he's drawn into a conflict that puts the fate of Wakanda and the entire world at risk."

The roots of superhero Black Panther is based on the **Black Panther Party** (a political party that started in Oakland) with black individuals wanting to protect and provide for their own community.

The Black Panther Party was founded in October 1966 in Oakland, California, by **Huey Newton** and **Bobby Seale**, as a revolutionary organization dedicated to Black liberation, socialism, and armed self-defense against police brutality.

Mr. Klouse said the film features music by black artists like **Kendrick Lamar** and **The Weeknd**.

At the event, the BSU served food from **Saucy Mama's Jook Joint**, a Southern-style soul food restaurant on Guerneville Road, owned by Chef **Yvette Bidegain**.

According to Saucy Mama's website, the restaurant "draws on [Chef] Bidegain's Louisiana heritage to offer soulful Southern cuisine with a California twist."

The event offered many Southern soul food classics such as riblets, collard greens, hamhocks, mac and cheese, potato salad and snacks including popcorn, soda, and candy.

At the event, the BSU also started giving out free books by black authors donated by Mr. Reece's father and during the event decided to create a Black Literature Library with the remaining books.

"The books that were brought were gonna be donations," Mr. Reece explained. "So we were going to say, you know, give what you want for the books. Then my dad thought about it. He's the one that brought them and he said, 'you know what? let the kids have them. If they want to take the book home, they can take the book home. They can have them for free."

The leftover books will be used to create a new "Black Literature Library" in Mr. Klouse's classroom.

The library will contain "black authors or black themed books," Mr. Reece said. "Black history. That's good."

Near the end of the event, Mr. Reece said the BSU wanted to thank school psychologist **Lena Bragg**, Student Safety Advisor **Devaughn Jenkins**, social studies teacher **Paulina Lopez** and counselor **Nicole Cancilla** for their behind the scenes help on the movie night.

In Honor of Black History Month: A Poem by Piner Student Safety Advisor Robert "Bo" Reece – "Tales from the Cemetery"

Tales from the Cemetery

*Now I'm down and under and I'm just a kid
And you know I'm thinking about all the dirt I did
I'm only 10 years old
I ain't never been a teen
If only old folks died how'd this happen to me
Let me take a look
As I go way back
I think it all started with D selling crack
D was the man everybody saw
He had the Dope plan
Above the law*

*He said now sell sell sell
 Get rich rich quick
 Showing off many money
 Just for kicks
 I might be only 10 but I have common
 sense
 When D asked me I jumped
 at the chance.
 And right away I'm at 200\$ a day
 Don't see that type of money at burger
 king
 And all I have to do is watch the block
 For the black the whites and
 The undercover cops
 Now I'm feeling really really able
 Supporting my family and putting food on
 the table
 Now none of my shoes have holes in the
 bottom
 For every pair of air I went out and bought
 'em*



Piner SSA and Poet Robert "Bo" Reece

*But I guess I didn't do my job up to par
 Cause I didn't even see the drive by's blue car
 Ace from the Westside was claiming that cash
 And when you clean yards you gotta cut grass
 Now was it all worth some brand new sneakers
 cause when I hit the ground the only pulse was from my beeper
 Now it's all dark and you can call it scary
 But there is no one to hear
 My tales from the cemetery.*

Piner High School Sophomore Sebastian Witthaus Heard Echoes on the Stage of Poetry Out Loud Competition

By Jackeline Cruz and Aylin Montiel

When **Sebastian Witthaus** walked onto the stage for the high school **Poetry Out Loud** competition at **Sonoma State University**, the microphone felt heavier than it looked.

He had performed before at Piner High School, but this was different. The room was larger, the ceiling higher, the lights brighter. When he spoke his first line, his voice came back to him in a soft echo. For a split second, it didn't sound like his own.

Months earlier, he had chosen "The Conqueror Worm" by **Edgar Allan Poe**. At first, he was drawn to its dramatic imagery actors on a stage, caught in forces beyond their control. It had helped him win first place at his school competition. But as he studied it more closely, the poem revealed something darker.



**Sebastian Witthaus
At Poetry Out Loud
Competition**

"I came to understand Poe's interpretation of the meaninglessness of life," Mr. Witthaus reflected.

That realization led him to his second poem: "O Captain! My Captain!" by Walt Whitman. To him, Whitman's famous elegy was not just about mourning a fallen leader it was about the cost of struggle, about victory overshadowed by death.

"You'll never be able to fully celebrate the fruits of your labor due to death and trauma," he said. "That's what the poem meant to me."

But this journey had begun years before.

As a freshman, Mr. Witthaus had participated in Piner's Poetry Out Loud competition and didn't place. He remembered stepping offstage that year with disappointment sitting heavy in his chest. Returning as a sophomore felt like closing a circle.

Last year, he competed against about eleven students and went last, "the position that gives you nothing to hide behind."

"I was more nervous at the school competition than at the university," he admitted.

Winning at Piner earned him a place at Sonoma State. Yet at the university competition, something shifted. The other contestants weren't rivals in the way he had imagined. They were talented, yes formidable, even, but they were also encouraging.

"They were all kind and cheering each other on," he said. "I made a lot of friends that day."

There was even an unexpected moment of coincidence: another student had chosen the same poem for the second round. The organizers gave them the option to switch the order of their performances so they wouldn't have to recite it back-to-back. It was a small moment, but it made the event feel human rather than cutthroat.

In the audience sat familiar faces. Three of his teachers **Ms. Maria Rios Zendejas**, **Ms. Perla Marquez**, and **Ms. Ceanne Browne** had come to support him. His parents were there too. "My parents sang the highest praises," Mr. Witthaus said.

His teachers told him how much he had improved since freshman year. That comment meant more than applause.

In the end, he didn't win at the university level. But as he walked across campus afterward, something felt different. Visiting Sonoma State had shown him what college could look like classrooms buzzing with ideas, students who cared about art and language the way he was beginning to.

"What I'll remember most is the support and the opportunity," he said.

For someone who once claimed not to like poetry, the transformation surprised even him.

"I truly enjoy poetry now," he admitted. "It helps me put my feelings into words and understand the emotions of a poet."

The microphone no longer felt heavy. The echo of his voice no longer startled him. Instead, it reminded him that his words carried across a room, across a campus, across years of growth.

He's considering competing again next year. Rules may change. Poems may be limited. But one thing is certain: Mr. Witthaus no longer steps onto a stage wondering if he belongs there.

He knows he does.

CORRECTIONS

A story in the January issue of *"The Piner Prospector"* incorrectly reported that budget cuts were put forward by the Santa Rosa Board of Education. The story should have said the cuts were put forward by the Santa Rosa City Schools District.

A story about the likely elimination of the Grace Program misspelled the name of Senior Alyssa Correa.

TO SUBMIT A TIP ABOUT AN EVENT THAT THE PINER PROSPECTOR SHOULD COVER, PLEASE EMAIL JOURNALISM TEACHER DAN LONKEVICH AT DLONKEVICH@SRCS.K12.CA.US

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