

FBI, IRS seize Oakland charter schools' records

Jill Tucker

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FBI and Internal Revenue Service agents seized several boxes of records, phones and computers during a raid at the home of Ben Chavis, the former director of three controversial Oakland charter schools.

At the same time, federal agents Wednesday evening were filling a van with documents and other records from the three American Indian charter schools in the coordinated raid witnessed by at least a handful of students, school officials said.

The raid caught the charters' staff by surprise, but city and Oakland Unified school officials said Thursday that they were aware of an investigation that started at least several months ago.

Chavis said the sealed federal warrants included his wife, Marsha Amador, who is also a former employee of the charter schools.

"Anything with my name on it, the warrant said they could take," he said.

The agents confiscated his phones and computers as well as tax and other records dating back to 2000 at his Oakland home, Chavis said.

FBI officials declined to comment further on the scope or nature of the investigation.

The raids were the latest saga in a long, divisive battle over the high-performing charter schools. The Oakland school board voted to shut down the charters in March over financial impropriety.

In 2012, a state investigation of the charters' finances found several instances of fiscal impropriety, including \$3.8 million in payments to Chavis and his wife through real estate deals, consulting agreements and other services, raising ethical questions and conflict-of-interest concerns.

The Alameda County school board upheld the school district's decision in late June.

But the charters' leadership persuaded an Oakland Superior Court judge Monday to issue a court order allowing the schools to remain open while they appeal to the state Board of Education.

The judge is expected to finalize the preliminary injunction ruling within the next few days.

The three schools serve about 1,200 students who post some of the highest standardized test scores in the state. The judge ruled that it would be an undue burden on the students and their families to shut the school while the appeal played out.

The schools have been both lauded and criticized for harsh rules and strict discipline that, under Chavis, included humiliation and profanity.

Even without Chavis at the helm, the students are expected to complete up to three or four hours of homework nightly and adhere to unusual policies.

School rules, for example, require an ill student to show up to school in uniform to pick up the day's work in order for his or her class to maintain a perfect attendance record.

American Indian charter officials said staff cooperated with the agents, who arrived shortly before 5 p.m. just as the schools' mandatory summer program was winding down for the day.

"What they were asked to give, they gave," said Sandra Varner, the schools' spokeswoman.

Chavis said he also fully cooperated with the federal search.

"I was glad they showed up," he said. "I was waiting on them for a year."

Chavis has maintained his innocence and defended the charter schools. He said he napped while the federal agents took possession of

his records.

"If you didn't do anything, why be upset?" he said. "If I stole money I need to be put in jail, but the schools need to stay open."

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