

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Bell Jr. v. Saddleback Valley Unified School District

Bell Jr. · No. 24-cv-05545-JST · Decided October 8, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Northern District of California resolves motions to dismiss the plaintiffs’ second amended complaint concerning alleged interference with familial relationships involving a high school football player. The court grants the motions filed by CIF and by Next Level and Briscoe, grants in part and denies in part the District Defendants’ motion, preserves an unjust-enrichment claim against Johnson, limits damages claims against the District Defendants, and dismisses the civil conspiracy claim without prejudice.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Northern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Jon S. Tigar
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Northern District of California
DECIDED	October 8, 2025
DOCKET	24-cv-05545-JST
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Plaintiffs filed a second amended complaint asserting claims including Monell liability under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, negligence, negligent infliction of emotional distress, intentional infliction of emotional distress, unjust enrichment, punitive damages, and civil conspiracy. Defendants moved to dismiss under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6).
STANDARD OF REVIEW	On a Rule 12(b)(6) motion, the Court accepts factual allegations as true and construes the pleadings in the light most favorable to the plaintiff, but requires sufficient factual matter to state a claim that is plausible on its face.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished, nonprecedential district-court opinion
PARTIES	Phillip Bell Jr., Maria Lorna Barnes, Anthony Barnes v. Saddleback Valley Unified School District Board, California Interscholastic Federation, Klutch Sports Group, Next Level Sports & Academics,

TOPICS

motions to dismiss

section 1983

municipal liability

civil procedure

negligence

PRACTICE AREAS

civil rights

civil procedure

constitutional law

torts

remedies

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Plaintiffs plausibly alleged municipal liability against Saddleback Valley Unified School District or CIF under any Monell theory based on an official policy or custom, failure to train, or final policymaker ratification.
2. Whether Plaintiffs plausibly alleged negligence or negligent infliction of emotional distress against Briscoe and Next Level.
3. Whether Plaintiffs plausibly alleged intentional infliction of emotional distress against Briscoe and Next Level.
4. Whether Plaintiffs plausibly alleged unjust enrichment against Johnson, Briscoe, and Next Level.
5. Whether punitive and compensatory damages could be pursued against the District Defendants in their individual capacities while damages claims against the District or officials in their official capacities were barred.
6. Whether Plaintiffs' newly added civil-conspiracy claim under § 1983 was outside the scope of the leave to amend and should be dismissed.

HOLDINGS

1. Plaintiffs failed to state a Monell claim against the Saddleback District under an official-policy-or-custom, failure-to-train, or final-policymaker-ratification theory.
2. Plaintiffs failed to state a Monell claim against CIF, and the claim was dismissed without leave to amend.
3. Plaintiffs failed to state negligence or negligent-infliction-of-emotional-distress claims against Briscoe and Next Level.
4. Plaintiffs failed to plausibly allege intentional infliction of emotional distress against Briscoe and Next Level.
5. The unjust-enrichment claim against Johnson was sufficiently pleaded and would not be dismissed at the motion-to-dismiss stage.
6. Plaintiffs failed to state unjust-enrichment claims against Briscoe and Next Level.
7. Damages claims against Saddleback District and employees sued in their official capacities were dismissed with prejudice, except to the extent Plaintiffs sought injunctive relief; punitive and

compensatory damages claims against Wong, Osborne, and Johnson in their individual capacities were not dismissed.

8. The newly added § 1983 civil-conspiracy claim was dismissed without prejudice because it exceeded the scope of the leave to amend.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“To survive a motion to dismiss under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6), a complaint must contain “a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief.”” (Section III)

“A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” (Section III)

“A policymaker’s knowledge of an unconstitutional act does not, by itself, constitute ratification. Instead, a plaintiff must prove that the policymaker approved of the subordinate’s act.” (Section IV.A.1)

“The Eleventh Amendment bars damages actions against state officials acting in their official capacities because these actions are treated as suits against the state itself.” (Section IV.E)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Plaintiffs, including Phillip Bell Jr., the father of Phillip Bell III, and Phillip III's maternal grandparents, alleged that Defendants interfered with their familial relationship with Phillip III. They alleged that Defendants interfered with enforcement of a custody order and arranged for Phillip III's transportation and housing without Plaintiffs' consent, allegedly to advance interests connected to Phillip III's status as a high-school football player. Plaintiffs also alleged that school officials and private actors failed to help restore their relationship with Phillip III and that certain Defendants benefited from his football success.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The Court previously granted in part and denied in part Defendants' motions to dismiss and granted Plaintiffs leave to file a second amended complaint solely to cure identified deficiencies. Plaintiffs filed the second amended complaint on July 1, 2025. The Court granted the motions of CIF and Next Level and Briscoe, granted the District Defendants' motion in part and denied it in part, dismissed several claims without leave to amend, dismissed the newly added civil-conspiracy claim without prejudice, and allowed the unjust-enrichment claim against Johnson and certain individual-capacity damages claims to proceed.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- *Mendiondo v. Centinela Hospital Medical Center*, 521 F.3d 1097, 1104 (9th Cir. 2008)
- *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009)
- *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 556-57, 570 (2007)

- *Kniesel v. ESPN*, 393 F.3d 1068, 1072 (9th Cir. 2005)
- *Rodriguez v. County of Los Angeles*, 891 F.3d 776, 802-03 (9th Cir. 2018)
- *Monell v. Department of Social Services*, 436 U.S. 658, 694 (1978)
- *City of Canton v. Harris*, 489 U.S. 378, 390 (1989)
- *Gravelet-Blondin v. Shelton*, 728 F.3d 1086, 1097 (9th Cir. 2013)
- *Hartzell v. Marana Unified School District*, 130 F.4th 722, 735 (9th Cir. 2025)
- *AE ex rel. Hernandez v. County of Tulare*, 666 F.3d 631, 637 (9th Cir. 2012)
- *City of St. Louis v. Praprotnik*, 485 U.S. 112, 127 (1988)
- *Juricich v. County of San Mateo*, No. 19-cv-06413-WHO, 2020 WL 619840, at *4 (N.D. Cal. Feb. 10, 2020)
- *Sepehry-Fard v. Lee*, No. 20-cv-03585-EJD, 2021 WL 6113001, at *5 (N.D. Cal. Dec. 27, 2021)
- *Mathews v. Abington Heights School District*, 2023 WL 2601917, at *9 (M.D. Pa. Mar. 22, 2023)
- *Christie v. Iopa*, 176 F.3d 1231, 1239 (9th Cir. 1999)
- *Potter v. Firestone Tire & Rubber Co.*, 6 Cal. 4th 965, 984-85 (1993)
- *Burgess v. Superior Court*
- *Ileto v. Glock Inc.*, 349 F.3d 1191, 1203 (9th Cir. 2003)
- *Regents of University of California v. Superior Court*, 4 Cal. 5th 607, 664 (2018)
- *Williams v. State of California*, 34 Cal. 3d 18, 23 (1983)
- *Hughes v. Pair*, 46 Cal. 4th 1035, 1050-51 (2009)
- *City of Oakland v. Oakland Raiders*, 83 Cal. App. 5th 458, 478 (2022)
- *Hirsch v. Bank of America*, 107 Cal. App. 4th 708, 722 (2003)
- *Hafer v. Melo*, 502 U.S. 21, 25, 31 (1991)
- *Regents of University of California v. Doe*, 519 U.S. 425, 429 (1997)
- *Will v. Michigan Department of State Police*, 491 U.S. 58, 65-66 (1989)
- *C.W. v. Capistrano Unified School District*, 784 F.3d 1237, 1247 (9th Cir. 2015)
- *Belanger v. Madera Unified School District*, 963 F.2d 248, 254 (9th Cir. 1992)
- *Wells v. Board of Trustees of California State University*, 393 F. Supp. 2d 990, 999 (N.D. Cal. 2005)
- *Smith v. Wade*, 461 U.S. 30, 35 (1983)
- *Temple of 1001 Buddhas v. City of Fremont*, No. 21-cv-4661-CRB, 2022 WL 1570480, at *5 (N.D. Cal. May 18, 2022)
- *DeLeon v. Wells Fargo Bank, N.A.*, No. 10-cv-1390-LHK, 2010 WL 4285006, at *3 (N.D. Cal. Oct. 22, 2010)
- *Choudhuri v. Specialized Loan Servicing*, No. 22-CV-06993-JST, 2023 WL 6277327, at *5 (N.D. Cal. Sept. 26, 2023)
- *Kendall v. Visa U.S.A., Inc.*, 518 F.3d 1042, 1051-52 (9th Cir. 2008)