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Protest and Progress in Pasadena

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Usually, when people are angry or frustrated they just vent. But sometimes they take action -- initially a few people, who recruit others to the cause -- and sometimes they win. Social movements are typically built on small victories -- stepping-stones that give people a sense of their collective power and whet their appetites for further change. When others hear about these organizing success stories, it gives them a sense that they are not alone. The next time somebody asks them to get involved, they are more likely to join efforts to bring about change. That's Organizing 101.

A good example of this process at work occurred this week in Pasadena, California.

On Wednesday, the Pasadena *Star-News*, the local daily paper, published a front-page story under the headline: "PUSD middle and high school students' scores fall on state standardized tests." The reporter had looked at the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) scores released the previous day by the California Department of Education. Like her counterparts on many papers across the state, she compared the performance of students in the local school system with the statewide figures. Her 660-word story concluded that students in the Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD) - an urban district with about 19,500 students - did poorly in both math and English compared with statewide standards.

George Fatheree, a 33 year old lawyer and the father of a seven year old PUSD student, read the *Star-News* article and got angry. In the past year, Fatheree had gotten involved in efforts to improve PUSD, a district where almost two-thirds of the students are eligible for free and reduced meals (which means they come from low-income families), and where a majority of students are immigrants or the children of immigrants. Like other school districts in California, almost all of PUSD's funding comes from the state government, but California ranks 46th in the country in per-student spending, and has just slashed state spending for public education even more to deal with the state budget crisis.

Last year Fatheree, an African American and a graduate of Harvard, joined the board of the Pasadena Educational Foundation (PEF), a nonprofit that raises money for PUSD schools from private donors, corporations, foundations, and local fundraising events. He also served on the steering committee of a grassroots campaign to pass a \$350 million school bond last November to repair the district's aging facilities. Despite the fact that the vast majority of voters don't have children in the public schools (or any schools), and that the community was engulfed by the national downturn in the economy, the bond measure passed by an overwhelming 75% vote.

Fatheree knew as well as anyone that PUSD faced many challenges, but that under the new School Board and a very talented new superintendent, Edwin Diaz, the school district had been making steady progress.

So when Fatheree read the *Star News* story, he had already looked at the standardized test scores for PUSD and the state, and he knew that the reporter had got it wrong. Moreover, he knew that the *Star-News'* coverage of PUSD had consistently been negative for years, rarely reporting on its successes, mostly focusing on problems, contributing to a misleadingly negative public perception of the public schools - so negative that about one-third of school age students, mostly from middle-class families, attend private schools. Indeed, the paper had editorialized *against* last November's school bond measure.

To vent his frustration, Fatheree wrote a letter to the *Star-News*. His letter explained that the headline on Wednesday's front-page story -- "PUSD middle and high school students' scores fall on state standardized tests" -- was factually inaccurate. He noted that the percentage of students scoring proficient or above in English language arts and in math had *increased* in each of the district's three middle schools. No middle school saw its students' scores fall. In addition, each of the district's four comprehensive high schools saw an *increase* in the percentage of students scoring proficient or above in English language arts and math, with one exception - a one percent decline in math among students at Muir High School.

Fatheree's letter also noted the following: "The first sentence of [the reporter's] article states 'Pasadena Unified School District students continue to fall further behind their statewide peers in English and math.' This is also untrue. Statewide, students gained 4% in English language arts and 3% in math. PUSD's gains were greater than the state average. PUSD students gained 5% in English language arts and 4% in math. PUSD students did not 'continue to fall further behind.' They did the exact opposite - PUSD students improved at a faster rate than the statewide average."

His letter also pointed out that PUSD's progress was spread across the district: 26 of the district's 28 schools saw improvements in both English language arts and math.

After reciting the facts, Fatheree expressed his simmering frustrations with the city's only daily paper: "The factual inaccuracies in [the reporter's] article are unacceptable and irresponsible.... We do not expect the paper to be a cheerleader for the school

district (like many other local papers), but we do expect and demand accurate reporting about student achievement and progress. Our students have earned it."

Fatheree didn't wait for the *Star-News* to publish his letter. Instead, on Wednesday evening, he emailed it to a few dozen friends, including other PEF board members and other members of the steering committee of last year's school bond campaign. He urged people to call or email Steve Hunt, the senior editor, and ask that the *Star-News* "run a front page article in tomorrow's paper to correct the inaccurate and misleading information they published today" and to "commit to more accurate reporting about our public schools." (He had considered asking people to boycott the paper and cancel their subscriptions, but he decided to wait to see if the *Star-News* responded to his mini-campaign). He provided his friends with Hunt's phone number and email address.

One of the people to whom Fatheree sent his email was Darla Dyson, the parent of three PUSD students who is active in the school PTA and also served on last year's bond campaign's steering committee. Dyson, 42, who was active in the Obama campaign, is also a leader in a group called Invest In PUSD Kids, a network of parents, teachers, and school supporters in the district that has been organizing to build more community support for public schools. Now in its third year, Invest in PUSD Kids has organized vigils and marches to protest state budget cuts, pushed the City government to work more closely with the school district, sponsored a voter registration drive among school parents, and alerted people about issues that impact the district and its students. A few months ago, it began a loose affiliation with PICO, a national network of community organizing groups. Dyson happens to be in charge of the group's newsletter and sends occasional notices about meetings and other events to Invest In PUSD's Kids email list, which has grown to 692 people.

Soon after getting Fatheree's letter, Dyson forwarded it to Invest in Kids' email list. Dyson's email program, called Constant Contact, allows her to track how many people open the emails and how many forward them to others. She was able to see that, within a day after sending her email to the Invest in PUSD Kids list, at least 173 out of 692 people had opened it. Even more striking, she saw that many people had forwarded the email and that an additional 356 people -- not on the Invest in PUSD Kids list -- had opened it. In total, by Thursday afternoon, at least 529 people opened Fatheree's letter to the *Star-News*.

On Thursday morning, one of the people on Dyson's Invest in PUSD Kids' list, a public school parent, called *Star-News* editor Hunt to complain about the inaccurate story the previous day. He told the caller that he hadn't heard any complaints about the story and that he thought it was accurate. But by early afternoon, the tide had turned. At 2 pm, he told a PUSD teacher, who called him to complain, that he'd been getting lots of calls and that that the paper would print a correction. By 3 pm on Thursday, people who had contacted Hunt by email each received the same response from him. It read: "Thanks for taking the time to e-mail me. The accuracy of our stories and the credibility of our newspaper are of the utmost importance to me. I have investigated this matter and determined that our reporter was wrong when she wrote that PUSD students have fallen further behind their statewide peers. We plan to correct this mistake in tomorrow's paper when she writes another story about the district's test scores."

In addition, Fatheree helped organize a meeting with Larry Wilson, a *Star-News* columnist who also serves as the paper's public editor - its ombudsman, responsible for community relations. Joining Fatheree at the 4 pm meeting were Supt. Edwin Diaz, Joan Favre (PEF's executive director), George Brumder (a prominent local lawyer, civic leader, and chair of the PEF board), PUSD Board member Ed Honowitz, and Terry Dutton, PUSD's data expert. The delegation presented Wilson with the facts about PUSD's performance on the state test scores and compared them with the inaccurate information in the paper's article the previous day. They also expressed concern about the *Star-News*' misleadingly negative coverage of the local public schools. Like Hunt, Wilson initially defended the article's accuracy, but the group eventually persuaded him that the reporter had gotten it wrong. Like Hunt, he promised that the paper would redress the group's legitimate grievance.

By midnight, the *Star-News* had posted the lead front-page article -- not the typical correction buried on an inside page -- in the Friday paper on its website. The same reporter that wrote the controversial story authored the Friday article under the headline: "District scores still on the rise." The story began with an "Editor's Note" that read: "A Wednesday story on the 2009 Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program erroneously said Pasadena Unified School District students had fallen further behind their statewide peers in English and math. In fact, the PUSD improved five percent in English and four percent in math, which was better than the statewide improvement of four percent in English and three percent in math."

The story's lead sentence said: "The Pasadena Unified School District saw widespread improvement among its students in English and math scores, according to 2009 STAR test results released this week by the California Department of Education."

In the 786-word article, the reporter provided accurate statistics to illustrate this positive trend, and quoted Alice Petrossian, PUSD's chief academic officer: "We are celebrating and we believe we did a tremendous job with our principals, teachers and most important, our students."

The story included statistics about the performance of different schools within the district and then used interviews with the district's director of elementary education, as well as two school principals, to explain what they had done to achieve the improvement in test scores. Unlike the Wednesday story, in which the voices of PUSD parents were absent, Friday's article quoted Deborah Reff, the parent of a PUSD sixth-grader, who, said that her experience with the public schools has been "fabulous."

By early Friday morning, Fatheree and Dyson had already sent an email to their overlapping lists of PUSD advocates, providing a link to the *Star-News*' mea-culpa story, and celebrating their victory.

Some of them intend to show up at the School Board meeting next Tuesday, congratulate the board members and staff for improvement in test scores, and urge them to put a ballot measure before voters next year to increase local property taxes to raise funds for PUSD schools. Under California law, more than two-thirds of voters have to vote "yes" to enact a parcel tax increase. But the PUSD activists believe that not only do voters understand that the state government's drastic cuts are devastating local schools, but that voters will support a tax increase if they know that the schools are getting better. And they hope that the *Star-News* will be an ally - or at least a neutral but accurate chronicler - of the Pasadena Unified School District's efforts to provide its racially and economically diverse students with a good education.

Pasadena isn't Montgomery, and George Fatheree isn't Rosa Parks. In a world of big injustices, getting a small daily newspaper to print a correction may not seem like a major achievement. But what's important is *how* it happened. A small group of people, angry over a shared grievance, enlisted others, developed a strategy, focused their frustrations on a target, acted together, and got a problem solved collectively that none of them could have solved individually. Ever since the Boston Tea Party, that's how big social changes have begun.

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