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LOS ANGELES

## Steve Zimmer Defeats the Billionaire Boys Club With a Cost-Effective School Board Campaign

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On Tuesday night, an exhausted Steve Zimmer celebrated his against-the-odds re-election victory for the Los Angeles Unified School District board against Kate Anderson, whom he defeated with 52 percent of the vote. The next morning he was at Occidental College, preparing to teach his popular course on education policy that evening. This is Zimmer's second year as an adjunct professor at Occidental, where he teaches two courses that have generated enormous enthusiasm among students interested in education issues.

That night, Zimmer followed his prepared lesson plan, but he could have taught a seminar on community organizing and the importance of grassroots activism in overcoming the influence of big money in politics.

Thanks to a huge infusion of campaign contributions from corporate titans like New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, media mogul Rupert Murdoch and business big-wig Eli Broad, Anderson's campaign spent almost twice as much as Zimmer's -- \$1.9 million to \$1 million -- in the race for the school board's District 4 seat, according to the City Ethics Commission. District 4 stretches from the West Side to the West San Fernando Valley.

Despite being outspent, Zimmer's campaign was more cost-effective. Anderson had 29,537 votes to Zimmer's 32,137. Translated into dollars-per-vote, Anderson spent \$63 for every vote she received, while Zimmer spent \$32 per vote. Zimmer's campaign was leaner, if not meaner.

Anderson's campaign benefitted from huge contributions made to the Coalition for School Reform (CSR), a political action committee created by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa that solicited funds from corporate honchos, many from outside Los Angeles, and is allegedly "independent" of the Anderson campaign. Some of the same people also contributed directly to Anderson's campaign, where the legal limit is \$1,000. The direct donors to Anderson's race included individuals involved with private charter schools, attorneys with corporate law firms and executives of banks, businesses, and companies that do business with school districts.

Not surprisingly, the median campaign contribution to Anderson's campaign was \$500, five times that of Zimmer. Anderson is a lawyer who was picked by the corporate "reformers" to run against Zimmer, who has occasionally been critical of John Deasey (the former Gates Foundation executive who was recruited to run the LA schools), particularly over the proliferation of private charter schools sanctioned by the district and the over-emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing.

About \$1.5 million of the \$1.9 million spent on Anderson's behalf came from the CSR. It used the money not only to buy expensive television and radio ads, and to send slick flyers to voters through the mail, but also to pay for precinct walkers. Zimmer had fewer ads and mailers, and relied more on volunteer canvassers and phone-bankers.

Zimmer's major donor was the United Teachers of Los Angeles, whose \$855,692 came from small contributions from teachers. (Before his election to the school board four years ago, Zimmer spent 17 years as a high school teacher in Los Angeles.) With the exception of the UTLA money, Zimmer relied primarily on small contributions. His median campaign contribution was \$100, one fifth that of Anderson.

Zimmer's victory was due in part to the backlash against the billionaires bankrolling Anderson's campaign. Thanks to stories in the *Los Angeles Times* and other news outlets, voters learned about the efforts of the CSR to recruit huge donations, including big ones from outside LA, to defeat Zimmer. The one million dollar donation from Bloomberg was particularly appalling to many voters.

During the campaign, Zimmer urged his supporters to resist the "takeover of the board and this assault on our democracy" by big money interests.

The Coalition for School Reform pulled in more than \$3.9 million on behalf of three candidates -- incumbent Monica Garcia (who won her race with 56 percent of the vote), Antonio Sanchez (who faces a May 21 runoff with Monica Ratliff) and Anderson (who lost to Zimmer).

Garcia's campaign was the most expensive and least cost-effective efforts among the school board candidates. She spent \$116 for every vote she received, even more than the top two candidates hoping to succeed Mayor Villaraigosa. Controller Wendy Greuel spent \$85 per vote, while City Council member Eric Garcetti spent \$57 per vote in their mayoral campaigns.

Despite that disparity, Garcetti earned 33 percent of the vote in the eight-candidate field on Tuesday, while Greuel netted 29 percent. The two face off in the May 21 run-off.

In addition to Bloomberg's \$1 million donation, the big donors to the Coalition for School Reform included real estate and insurance magnate Broad (\$250,000); former Univision head Jerrold Prenchio (\$250,000); New York City-based News America Inc., an affiliate of News Corp., the media conglomerate run by Murdoch (\$250,000); Joel Klein, the former New York City school chancellor who now works for Amplify, Murdoch's education division which has contracts with LAUSD for standardized testing materials (\$50,000); entertainment executive Casey Wasserman (\$100,000), DreamWorks chief Jeffrey Katzenberg (\$50,000); Megan Chernin, wife of Peter Chernin, a former executive of Murdoch's News Corporation who now runs the Chernin Group, a \$400 million entertainment investment fund (\$100,000); and Jamie Alter Lynton, wife of Michael Lynton, CEO of Sony Pictures (\$100,000).

In addition, StudentsFirst, a corporate-funded lobby group headed by Michelle Rhee, the former head of the Washington, DC school system, pitched in with another \$250,000. A shadowy northern California-based organization, the Emerson Education Fund, donated \$100,000. It has ties to Stacey Rubin (a director of the Los Angeles Parents Union, a corporate-sponsored front group that pretends to be the voice of parents) and Laurene Powell Jobs (widow of Apple's Steve Jobs). Apple has contracts with LAUSD. The California Charter Schools Association donated \$340,000. Carrie Walton Penner, daughter of Walmart chairman Rob Walton, is the vice-chair of the California Charter Schools Association, which has received big contributions from the Walton Family Foundation.

The Zimmer-Anderson school board race attracted national attention, including articles in the *New York Times*, because it was seen as a test of the effort by corporate power-brokers to run schools like businesses, a strategy that they and the media misleadingly call "school reform." What they're really after is not "reform" (improving schools for the sake of students) but "privatization" (business control of public education). They think public schools should be run like corporations, with teachers as compliant workers, students as products, and the school budget as a source of profitable contracts and subsidies for textbook companies, consultants, and others engaged in the big business of education.

They want is to turn public schools into educational Wal-Mart run on the same model of corporate-style "efficiency." They want to expand charter schools that compete with each other and with public schools in an educational "market place." (LA already has more charter schools than any other district in the country). They want to evaluate teachers and students like they evaluate new products -- in this case, using the bottom-line of standardized test scores. Most teachers will tell you that over-emphasis on standardized testing turns the classroom into an assembly line, where teachers are pressured to "teach to the test," and students are taught, robot-like, to define success as answering multiple-choice tests. Not surprisingly, the billionaires want their employees -- teachers -- to do what they're told, without having much of a voice in how their workplace functions. That means destroying the teachers' main line of defense against arbitrary management -- their union. Rather than treat teachers like professionals, they view them as the hired help.

In her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, historian Diane Ravitch calls this group "The Billionaire Boys Club," an interconnected network of wealthy corporate leaders and philanthropists who've joined forces to promote market-driven school changes. This educational ruling class has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into think tanks, advocacy groups, and political campaigns to get their way. In Los Angeles, the billionaires have bankrolled the Coalition for School Reform as well as LA's Promise, Parent Revolution, and the Los Angeles Fund for Public Education -- all front groups designed to sell their version of "school reform."

**Peter Dreier teaches politics and chairs the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. His latest book is *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame* (Nation Books, 2012)**

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