

In Pasadena, a Vote of Confidence for Public Schools

Posted: 05/13/2010 5:32 pm

[California](#), [Invest In PUSD Kids](#), [Measure CC](#), [Pasadena Chamber Of Commerce](#), [Pasadena Education Network](#), [Pasadena Educational Foundation](#), [Pasadena Unified School District](#), [Community Organizing](#), [Parcel Tax](#), [Pico](#), [Public Schools](#), [School Funding](#), [Los Angeles News](#)

Tony Gordo, Ruth Strick, Cushon Bell, and George Brumder spent much of the last two months making phone calls several nights a week from a make-shift office on the second floor of the First United Methodist Church in Pasadena, California.

Gordo was calling Spanish-speaking voters, urging them to vote "yes" on Measure CC, a \$120 parcel tax for the Pasadena Unified School District. The 50-year old Gordo has worked for PUSD for 16 years, first as a teacher's aide and for the past 10 years as a painter with the district's maintenance division. He has two children at PUSD's John Muir High School and another at Pasadena Community College. His union, Teamsters Local 911, initially recruited Gordo to the CC phone bank, but he soon began showing up at the church on his own on a regular basis.

Strick, 78, is a career counselor and silversmith who has been active in Pasadena's arts community. She learned about the CC campaign from a local arts group and became one of its most effective volunteer phone-bankers. The 38-year old Bell is a teacher in the Los Angeles schools who has two children in Pasadena's public schools. She is a leader with Invest in PUSD Kids, a grassroots community group, which helped organize the CC campaign's volunteers. Brumder, 72, is a retired corporate lawyer and a well-connected and energetic philanthropist whose grown children attended private schools. He serves as president of the Pasadena Educational Foundation, which raises funds for the public schools, and chaired the CC campaign committee.

These four were among the more than 700 volunteers mobilized by the Measure CC campaign. They made phone calls, walked precincts, held house meetings, and spoke to neighborhood meetings, religious congregations, and school organizations. The volunteers included parents of students in PUSD as well as private schools, residents without school-age children, teachers, seniors, businesspersons, clergy, and many others from all neighborhoods, ethnic groups, and income classes. Many volunteers had not previously been involved in any election campaign, including many young people.

In addition, the campaign had a full-time organizer - Darla Dyson, 42, a parent of three PUSD students - and several part-time organizers, who were trained in grassroots mobilization by Jared Rivera, a veteran organizer with the PICO network of community organizations.

When the ballots were counted on May 4, Measure CC received 54% of the vote. That's a higher proportion of votes than either George W. Bush or Barack Obama garnered in their successful presidential victories. But, officially, CC lost, because under state law parcel taxes need a two-thirds vote to pass.

Without the \$7 million each year that CC would have raised, PUSD, with about 20,000 students, now has to make drastic cuts. All school libraries, summer school, advanced placement classes, are now on the chopping block. Class sizes will increase. Music, theater, and art programs will take a hit. This week, PUSD sent lay-off notices to 207 teachers, librarians, nurses, counselors, psychologists, administrators, clerical and maintenance workers.

The School Funding Crisis

Pasadena is not alone. More than 26,000 California teachers have already received pink slips for next fall. Nationwide, as many as 300,000 teachers could lose their jobs in the upcoming school year.

Every occupant of the White House promises to fix the nation's fragmented education system, with over 13,000 local school districts. George W. Bush introduced his No Child Left Behind program that increased the number of standardized tests students have to take each year. Obama's stimulus package allowed local districts to save about half a million teachers' jobs this year, but that funding has not been renewed. Obama has recently unveiled several new proposals to link federal funds to teacher and school performance standards.

In fact, however, the federal government only contributes about 9% of the nation's public school funding. States provide slightly little less than half of all K-12 funding, while local governments generally contribute about 44% of total. America's public schools are chronically under-funded, but the recession has deepened the crisis, and widened the gap in funding between wealthy and other school districts. To keep their schools afloat, communities resort to private fundraising and supplemental taxes, which gets harder to do when families are facing economic hard times.

Like their counterparts everywhere, Pasadena's parents have been frustrated trying to raise money for their kids' schools by holding bake sales, selling t-shirts, and running casino nights and silent auctions. The 33-cents-a-day Measure CC parcel tax, which would have been in place for five years, offered an alternative. It would have filled only one-third of PUSD's \$23 million budget gap, but it would have helped the district avoid the most painful cuts.

So campaign volunteers are understandably disappointed and angry by CC's defeat. From the beginning, they faced an uphill battle to win the two-thirds margin. But in many respects, this was a vote of confidence in PUSD's public schools. In this economic recession, a significant majority of voters in Altadena, Pasadena, and Sierra Madre said "yes" to a \$120/year parcel tax to support public schools.

Moreover, the turnout was extraordinarily high, reflecting the hard work of the CC campaign volunteers as well as the growing recognition of PUSD's recent progress. More than 30,000 people - about one-quarter of all eligible voters - cast ballots. This is an extraordinarily high

turnout for a local measure, especially with no other election or issue on the ballot. (The School Board elections in March 2009, for example, attracted only 11,442 voters, about 10 percent of all those eligible).

In waging the campaign, the CC activists rallied a broad and diverse constituency behind the public schools. Although the campaign is over, the movement has just begun. The defeat has triggered a new energy to challenge the chronic under-funding of public education.

The harsh reality is that, like every school district in California, Pasadena schools are still suffering from the shock waves produced by Proposition 13, the statewide initiative passed in 1978 that put a ceiling on local property taxes. Since then, school districts have been almost totally dependent on the state for school funding. Once among the best public education systems in the nation -- from kindergarten through college -- California has now sunk to one of the worst.

California is the 7th wealthiest state in the country (in per-capita income), but it ranks 46th in per student spending, according to *Education Week* -- \$8,164 compared with the national average of \$10,557. It ranks 42th in the number of students per teacher, resulting in large average class sizes. California has 20.9 students per teacher, compared to a national average of 15.5. It is at the very bottom in the ratio of counselors, school nurses, and librarians to students. California has 5,660 students for each librarian compared to 901 students per librarian nationally. Despite this, the state has already cut \$17 billion from public education in the past two years and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed slashing another \$2.4 billion this year.

A parcel tax is one way for local communities raise additional revenues for their schools. But the anti-government zealots who sponsored Proposition 13 wanted to put as many obstacles in their way as possible. Thus, they imposed the two-thirds threshold for enacting local parcel taxes.

Between 2001 and June 2009, out of 980 California school districts, 132 conducted parcel tax elections and 83 districts passed them. Only seven of those districts were in Southern California; 66 were within the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area. Small districts were most successful; 66 (80%) of the districts that have passed parcel taxes serve fewer than 10,000 students. Moreover, parcel taxes often fail the first time they come before voters. Once school advocates are able to win a parcel tax victory, however, voters are likely to renew it at the ballot box in subsequent years.

Not surprisingly, affluent communities are most likely to pass parcel taxes, and do so at a higher level than less well-off districts. Last year, for example, voters in the wealthy Los Angeles suburb of San Marino - where the median household income is \$154,263 and only 1.3% of students are eligible for free-and-reduce meals, a proxy for low-income -- approved an addition to their existing parcel tax, bringing the total to \$1,090 per parcel. But even with that new revenue, San Marino's schools face a \$5 million out of its \$29.5 million budget. To help fill the gap, the San Marino Schools Foundation will be asking every family in the district to make a voluntary \$2,000 contribution per student. The other communities near Pasadena that have recently passed school parcel taxes are also among the wealthiest, including La Canada Flintridge (with only 1% low income students) and South Pasadena (8.6%).

On May 4, six California school districts - all in the northern part of the state - passed local parcel taxes. Each of them -- Acalanes (in Contra Costa County), Palo Alto, Fremont, and Union (Santa Clara County), and Menlo Park and Portola (San Mateo County) -- are all well-off communities that were voting to extend existing parcel taxes. These districts have few low-income students; only between 1.1% and 13.5% of their schools' population are eligible for free and reduced meals.

Larger urban school districts don't fare as well when they ask voters to tax themselves to fund public schools. Last year, for example, voters in Long Beach - where 68% of students come from low-income families - rejected a parcel tax, with only 43% voting "yes." On the same day, voters in Oxnard (with 79% low income students) rebuffed a parcel tax with 47% of the vote. Among the largest school districts, only Oakland, San Francisco, and West Contra Costa have passed parcel taxes.

When affluent communities pass local parcel taxes, while economically hard-hit communities fail to reach the two-thirds threshold, the funding gap between rich and poor school districts widens even further. This gap is compounded when parents in wealthy districts supplement public funds with private contributions that families in less well-off districts can't afford.

Pasadena's Tale of Two Cities

The situation in Pasadena is different. It has elements of both big urban school districts and affluent suburban ones - a real tale of two cities. The Pasadena Unified School District includes Pasadena (with about 148,000 residents), Sierra Madre (11,000), and unincorporated Altadena (44,000).

Pasadena, which is adjacent to Los Angeles, is an old city by California standards, incorporated in 1886. By the early 1900s it had become a rural resort for wealthy visitors from the East and Midwest. It soon attracted a professional class of full-time residents who over the years created world-class institutions, including the California Institute of Technology, the Art Center College of Design, the Pasadena Playhouse, the Huntington Library, the Norton Simon Museum, Fuller Theological Seminary, and the famous Rose Bowl, which sponsors the annual college football game and the annual Tournament of Roses parade. Cal Tech's prominence led to the establishment of the nearby Jet Propulsion Lab (run by NASA) and several major engineering and science-oriented corporations.

A 1939 Columbia University study ranked Pasadena as the nation's most livable city. It was wealthy, well-planned and conservative. Its city council was, until recently, called a "board of directors."

From its early days, Pasadena was a segregated city. African Americans, who came to Pasadena to work in its hotels, mansions, and other service industries, have traditionally lived in the city's northwest quadrant. When baseball pioneer Jackie Robinson was growing up in that neighborhood in the 1920s and 1930s, blacks were treated like second class citizens. Blacks were

only allowed to swim in the municipal pool at Brookside Park on Tuesdays (the day the water was changed) - a practice that continued until 1944, after a suit by the NAACP. Blacks could only use the YMCA one day a week. In its movie theaters, blacks were limited to the segregated balconies. In the early 1990s, the Tournament of Roses' board of directors - the symbolic bastion of the city's old-guard establishment - still remained all-white and all-male.

Today, Pasadena is well-known for its arts-and-crafts bungalow houses, its commitment to historic preservation, and its "smart growth" urban planning. It has a thriving downtown commercial center and is a major tourist destination. The city has a large number of non-profit museums, arts, music, and cultural organizations, and social service agencies that provide opportunities for philanthropy.

Until 2001, Pasadena was represented in Congress by conservative Republicans. Today it is a predominantly Democratic city, but it also has a handful of liberal Republicans like Brumder who are active in the city's civic and cultural life. After being shut out for many years, the city's Blacks and Latinos are now represented on the boards of business, cultural, and civic groups as well as on the City Council and Board of Education. These realities infuriate some conservative Pasadenans who fondly recall the days when the city and its schools were mostly white and affluent.

But even today, however, the poor and almost-poor, most of them renters -- and disproportionately Black and Latino -- have no organized voice in the corridors of power.

In the late 1960s, three sets of parents (two of them white) sued to integrate the schools, leading to court-ordered busing in 1970. One result was middle class "white flight" from the public schools, including a dramatic increase in private school enrollment. Exacerbating the racial divide, La Canada Flintridge, a small, predominantly white neighboring community, pulled out of PUSD and create its own school district.

In the 1980s, immigration brought an influx of Latino and Armenian families. Latinos now represent 33% of the school district area's residents. Whites represent 43%, blacks 12%, and Asians 9%.

The three cities that comprise the school district -- Pasadena, Sierra Madre, and Altadena -- are mostly middle-class communities. The median household income in the district (\$65,356) is higher than the state's median (\$61,021). But 14% of the three communities' population (and 19% of children under 18) live below the poverty line. Indeed, Pasadena has the [widest gap](#) between the rich and poor of any California city.

In the past decade, gentrification and skyrocketing housing costs have pushed many low-income families, particularly Latinos and African Americans, out of the area. Between 1999 and 2006, the percentage of Pasadena households earning less than \$50,000 declined from 53% to 42%. This shouldn't be surprising in light of spiraling rents and house prices, the accelerating conversion of affordable apartments to expensive condominiums, the predominance of new luxury condos approved by city officials, and the paucity of affordable housing in Pasadena's development pipeline. The mortgage meltdown and foreclosure wave slowed down, but did not

halt, these trends.

The school district, however, does not reflect the community's demographics. Two-thirds of PUSD's approximately 20,000 students are eligible for subsidized meals. Latinos represent 56% of the students, and Blacks another 21%. English is not the first language for one-fifth of the students. One-third of school-age children attend one of the area's many private schools. Over many years, realtors, the local newspaper, private pre-schools, and the rumor mill have steered middle class families away from the public schools.

As middle-class flight from the public schools accelerated after the 1970s, the area's business and political power-brokers treated PUSD like an orphan. As the composition of the schools became poorer and darker, politicians assumed that most PUSD parents didn't vote. Because school families were not well-organized, they were ignored. Despite the presence of some of the nation's most prominent educational, scientific, and cultural institutions, PUSD might as well have been on a different planet.

In recent years, however, this dynamic has started to change. In 2006, PEF sponsored a report by Richard Kahlenberg, an education expert at the Century Foundation, entitled "[One Pasadena: Tapping the Community's Resources to Strengthen the Public Schools.](#)" that challenged the area's influentials to support PUSD.

Kahlenberg argued that low-income and minority students in PUSD would improve their performance if PUSD could take advantage of the area's business and cultural resources to partner with the schools and also draw more middle class families into the public schools. Citing research from other school districts, he argued that schools that are economically and racially integrated improve the performance of poor and middle-class students alike.

Although not everyone agreed with Kahlenberg's recommendations, it triggered a community conversation about the public schools. The Kahlenberg report led parents and others to ask: With Cal Tech, JPL, Parsons Engineering, and so many other science institutions in the area, why doesn't PUSD have a world-class math and science program or magnet school? With Huntington Library, Pasadena Playhouse, Art College Center of Design and the Norton Simon Museum in its midst, why doesn't PUSD have a high-profile performing and visual arts program? Why don't the area's businesses and nonprofit institutions work more closely with PUSD and Pasadena City College to provide students with internships and job training opportunities? Why doesn't PUSD harness the talents of the area's artists and musicians, scientists, businesspeople, actors, architects, librarians and many other professions -- to mentor students and volunteer in the schools?

The report arrived at the right time. Thanks to a combination of high housing costs, skyrocketing tuition for private schools, and a changing perception of PUSD, middle class families began returning to the public schools. A group of parents formed the [Pasadena Education Network](#) (PEN) to begin recruiting more families into PUSD, in part by offering tours of school campuses to dispel negative stereotypes about the schools, and sponsoring forums at which PUSD parents testified about their kids' positive experiences in public school. The [Pasadena Educational Foundation](#) (PEF) began taking local opinion-leaders - politicians, clergy, Realtors, and other

businesspersons - on school tours, too. When they didn't find the expected chaos and crime, they began to revise their opinions.

Five years ago, PUSD parents and community allies formed [Invest in PUSD Kids](#) (IIPK) to use community organizing to get the local government, cultural organizations, religious congregations, and business establishment more involved with the public schools. The group sponsored a voter registration drive among PUSD parents and students. It organized meetings with local elected officials. As a result of IIPK's efforts, the PUSD School Board began to hold regular meetings with Pasadena, Sierra Madre, and Altadena governing bodies.

Two years ago, IIPK issued a report documenting "best practices" of city-school partnerships across California, noting that similar cities like Burbank and Santa Monica invest millions of dollars in their local public schools. The group also led vigils at every school, and a march and rally attended by over 800 people, to draw attention to state budget cuts to education. Last year, in response to a misleading and inaccurate negative portrayal of PUSD in the *Pasadena Star News*, hundreds of IIPK members called and emailed newspaper officials. In an unprecedented turn of events the paper issued a front page correction and apology for inaccuracies in the story.

The PUSD schools started to turn around in the early 2000s. That progress accelerated under Superintendent Edwin Diaz. Since he was hired in 2008, day-to-day management has improved, restoring confidence in the public schools among local business leaders, city officials, and parents. Diaz put in place new programs for both gifted and disadvantaged students, including dual-language immersion programs in both Spanish and Mandarin. He focused resources on preventing drop-outs and on lifting the academic performance of the most disadvantaged students.

Those efforts paid off. Test scores have improved. In 2002 only three schools scored over 700 (out of 1,000) on the state's Academic Performance Index. In 2009, 23 (out of 27) schools scored above 700, 16 scored above 750 and 9 scored over 800. PUSD students improved more than their counterparts in LA County and statewide. Several schools have won state and national awards for their academics. Seeing that success, a growing number of middle-class families are sending their kids to PUSD schools.

The Battle Over Measure CC

But with the state government slashing funding each year, Diaz began making cuts to administrative staff and some support programs. Then, late last year, the recession gave Schwarzenegger an excuse to make even deeper cuts. Diaz, the School Board, and parent groups realized that any additional cuts would be devastating and decided it was time to ask the voters to pass a local parcel tax.

The Measure CC campaign committee brought together business, civic, and community leaders, including activists in the Latino and African American communities. Because this was entirely a mail-in ballot measure, the campaign did not plan a typical get-out-the-vote-on-election-day

effort. Instead, it organized daily phone banks for several months prior to identify likely "yes" voters, especially the "unlikely voters" who would require extra reminders to mail in their ballots. Once the County Registrar of Voters mailed the ballots in early April, the campaign had a month to target the likely "yes" voters to put them in the mail. The volunteers supplemented the phone calls with door-knocking during the last few weeks of the campaign.

The campaign also recruited the endorsements of most of the major organizations and civic leaders - a coalition that would have been unthinkable only five years ago. The supporters included the Pasadena-Foothills Association of Realtors, AARP, League of Women Voters, NAACP, Altadena Chamber of Commerce, Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, many religious congregations, Latino Forum, Armory Center for the Arts, West Pasadena Residents Association, LA County Federation of Labor, United Teachers of Pasadena Young & Healthy, the heads of many private schools, Jean-Lou Chameau (Cal Tech President), Charles Elachi, (Director of the Jet Propulsion Lab), Pasadena Mayor Bill Bogaard, and many others. The daily *Pasadena Star-News* and the *Pasadena Weekly* (both frequently hostile toward PUSD) endorsed the measure, as did the Pasadena and Sierra Madre city councils.

The only exception was the Pasadena Chamber of Commerce. Its legislative affairs committee voted to support CC, but Paul Little - the group's paid executive and a long-time PUSD-basher since his days on the City Council - successfully lobbied the Chamber's board members to oppose the measure. In rebuke, six former Chamber presidents publicly endorsed Measure CC.

Despite all this support, the Measure CC campaign was a major uphill battle. Two key factors made it difficult to reach the two-thirds threshold.

First, most eligible voters have no direct connection to PUSD. A majority do not have school-age children. Among those who do, one-third send their children to private schools. People's perceptions about PUSD are thus shaped by rumors, stereotypes, and out-of-date information. Many older voters still think about PUSD in terms of the busing battles of the 1970s, or mistakes made by school leaders decades ago. Younger voters - especially those in their 20s, 30s and 40s who have children - are more positive about PUSD than older voters.

The campaign sought to explain that a healthy community needs good schools and that the quality of public schools significantly affects property values, even for those without kids in PUSD. It also tried to make voters aware that PUSD has shown steady improvement in its management and test scores. But old stereotypes about the public schools persist and it was hard for the campaign to overcome them.

Those stereotypes were reinforced by the lies deliberately spread by CC's opponents. The "no" effort was led by Ross Selvidge (a Republican economist for CB Richard Ellis, a real estate consulting firm) and by several right-wingers and long-term PUSD-bashers -- Mary Dee Romney (twice an unsuccessful candidate for School Board), Rene Amy (who runs an anti-PUSD website) and Wayne Lusvardi (who has his own ultra-conservative website, Pasadena Subrosa).

The opponents lacked a grassroots base, but they were able to circulate their misinformation via conservative websites, email lists, and columns and letters-to-the-editor in the two local papers

that gave them a megaphone. Selvidge's group raised enough money to mail slick flyers to voters, although he refused to disclose the list of his donors to the local newspaper. (The "yes" campaign raised more money, mailed five flyers, and listed its contributors on its website).

The opposition's flyers and letters claimed, for example, that PUSD didn't need more money because enrollment was declining - ignoring years of steady budget cuts. Selvidge also claimed that PUSD gets more money than most school districts in Los Angeles County. In fact, public schools receive a standard amount of money per student (called "revenue limit income", which is based on average daily attendance) to fund regular education and operations. On this measure, PUSD ranked 41 out of 47 unified districts in Los Angeles County. Selvidge often said that Measure CC's proponents were vague about where the \$7 million a year would be spent. In fact, the specific priorities for CC spending were listed in the ballot measure, as required by law.

Second, the nation's economic condition and political mood certainly hurt. LA County's unemployment rate reached 12.4% in March, almost three points higher than the national rate. For some hard-pressed families, including seniors on fixed incomes, even \$120 a year seemed like a burden. In addition, voters' frustrations with government at all levels - stoked by the Tea Party fanatics - contributed to an ambivalent mood about government spending. Tough times also fuel racial hatred. Certainly some of CC's opponents were motivated by hostility toward the Latinos, immigrants, and African Americans who make up a majority of PUSD's students.

Those circumstances made it more difficult than the advocates anticipated to persuade voters to support another tax.

Next Steps

Less than 24 hours after CC was defeated, the Pasadena Educational Foundation began receiving checks for \$120, designated for PUSD programs in lieu of the annual parcel tax. The number of similar contributions accelerated over the next few days. The check-writers - PUSD parents and community supporters - convinced PEF to send a letter to voters asking those who had voted "yes" to make their contributions. Meanwhile, school principals reported that they were getting phone calls from complete strangers offering to volunteer at school sites to help offset the increase in class size.

Can that spirit of charity and volunteerism also be translated into a grassroots movement to give PUSD parents - the low-income majority as well as the growing number of middle class families - a stronger political voice?

Before the campaign began, Invest in PUSD Kids, which took responsibility for organizing the field component of the Measure CC crusade, had about 700 names on its email list. By the time the campaign ended, that number had more than doubled. Moreover, the campaign brought out new activists and leaders, from all corners of the school district, many of whom had never participated in a political campaign before. IIPK intends to train them in the basics of community organizing.

Although the Measure CC campaign did not win two-thirds of the vote, it triggered a

community-wide conversation about the importance of public schools to the larger community -- in educating the next generation, training the future workforce, improving the business climate, strengthening housing values, and bringing the diverse population of the area together around a common goal of preparing young people for our future society.

The campaign laid the groundwork for an ongoing movement to support public schools. The key groups pushing to improve the schools have begun identifying ways that local residents and organizations can help continue PUSD's positive momentum.

First, to dispel rumors and misinformation about public schools, PEN and PEF are encouraging people to visit one or more of the campuses of PUSD schools and see for themselves the small miracles that occur every day.

Second, in light of the likely increase in class size, and the added pressures on classroom teachers, PUSD hopes to recruit more people - on their own or through their community groups, religious congregations, or PTAs - to volunteer on campuses and in classrooms.

Third, Invest in PUSD Kids will mount a campaign to get elected officials in Pasadena, Sierra Madre, and Altadena, to invest more resources in public schools. They could, for example, jointly operate parks, playgrounds and athletic facilities, jointly manage school and community libraries, or help fund health clinics at school sites.

Fourth, the state PTA and other groups are mounting an effort to pass a statewide ballot initiative to lower the threshold for passing local parcel taxes to 55 percent.

Fifth, education advocates need to lobby the state legislature to increase state funding for public schools so that California ranks closer to the middle than the bottom in per-student spending. They should also organize to [change the state law](#) that requires a two-thirds vote for the legislature to pass a budget and raise taxes.

The Measure CC campaign is over. But its momentum will continue to bear fruit as parents, teachers, and community allies ignite an exciting movement to support the community's children and their public schools.

Peter Dreier teaches political science at Occidental College and has two children in PUSD schools. He served on the Measure CC campaign steering committee.