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GROUND LEVEL COVERAGE OF CAMPAIGN '08

Terminator Budget Cuts Spur Protests Across Calif.

Like many students in the Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD), and across California, my daughters Amelia and Sarah, 11-year old twins, have been making posters opposing Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's draconian budget cuts for public schools: "We Like Our Schools." "Arnold: Don't Terminate Our Teachers." "Cuts Hurt Kids." "Fund Schools, Not War." (That last one is really intended for George Bush, not Gov. Schwarzenegger.)

The signs will be displayed Friday afternoon at protests in front of every school in the 20,000-student PUSD system. Parents, students, teachers, office staff, administrators, school board members, and concerned residents will be out in force, waving banners and alerting passing motorists about the looming cuts that will devastate public schools in the state. The protests are a warm-up for a big march through Pasadena on Saturday, May 31. Similar activities have been happening across the state. More than 4,000 teachers, parents and students packed the stands of affluent Mission Viejo High School's outdoor stadium in Orange County. Hundreds of their counterparts in working class Alhambra held a rally at the school district headquarters. At San Jose's Overfelt High School, students handed out postcards urging the governor, "Please don't kidnap my dreams." The Angry Tired Teachers, a rock band from Hayward, are taking a statewide "Cuts Hurt" bus tour.

In many years of activism, I've rarely seen such an outpouring of genuine grassroots anger and mobilization. Many of the parents engaged in these protests have never been politically active before. Some are involved with their school's PTA or as boosters for their kids' sports teams, but many of the protesters have been recruited by word-of-mouth and by email through other networks -- churches, soccer leagues, and neighborhood groups. The protest planning meetings focus on nuts-and-bolts but are also full of spirit. The parents, teachers, students, and community allies -- who reflect the district's racial and income diversity -- got their juices flowing coming up with slogans and chants for the rallies and May 31 march. One parent suggested they steal an idea from protesters in Alameda, in northern California, who lined the city's main streets with trash cans, got students to stand in them, and held up signs: "My future is too valuable to throw away." (Readers who want to learn more about the PUSD protests should contact Tracy Mikuriya at tracymikuriya@earthlink.net)

*Protesters at the Scanlon Center in Alhambra Wednesday.
(Walt Mancini/Pasadena Star News)*

Like many urban districts, the Pasadena school system has been traumatized by forces beyond its control. Middle class "white flight" from the public schools began in reaction to busing in the late 1960s. In the 1980s, immigration brought an influx of Latino students. In the past few years, gentrification and skyrocketing housing costs have pushed many low-income families, particularly Latinos and African Americans, out of the area, resulting in declining student enrollment, which damaged the district's budget and forced the closure of several schools. Even so, about two-thirds of PUSD's students are low-income, many of them from families where English is a second language.

Despite these trends, the Pasadena schools have started to make a turnaround. Test scores have increased, exciting new programs for both gifted and disadvantaged students have been put in place, and a growing number of middle-class families are returning to the public schools. Under Superintendent Edwin Diaz, hired last year, day-to-day management has improved, restoring confidence in the public schools among local business leaders, city officials, and parents.

But 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 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 ranks 46th in the nation in per-student spending, according to Education Week -- \$7,081 compared with the national average of \$8,973. It ranks 49th in the number of students per teacher, resulting in large average class sizes. It is at the very bottom in the ratio of counselors, librarians, and school nurses to students. It ranks 37th in school spending as a percentage of state taxable resources.

Now, to make matters even worse, Gov. Schwarzenegger has proposed about \$4 billion in inflation-adjusted cuts for the state's public schools. School districts around the state have already sent lay-off notices to thousands of teachers and other personnel. Morale among teachers, who are frustrated by the chronic job insecurity that comes as a result of the state's fiscal instability, has suffered a huge blow. School districts in Texas, Nevada, Virginia, Hawaii, and other states have put up billboards, taken out newspaper ads, and sent recruiters to California to lure teachers away.

Anticipating the state cuts, school administrators in Pasadena have been forced to plan to slice \$14 million from the district's \$120 million general fund budget. This comes on top of more than \$10 million in cuts over the past few years. Long-term district

employees have already received pink slips. Parents and teachers worry that arts and music programs, sports, special math, literacy and other programs will soon be gone.

As word of these pending cuts spread at local school sites, parents began talking to each other, and with teachers and administrators. Joan Goulding, who has two kids at Don Benito, a PUSD elementary school, has never lobbied state officials or been involved in any protests before, but last month she started working on a letter-writing and petition campaign to Schwarzenegger through her school's PTA. In the mornings, she's been collecting signatures on a petition from parents as they drop off their kids at school. But she wanted to do more and suggested that the PTA organize a demonstration to protest the budget cuts. Nora Schneir has a son in second grade at Longfellow School, where she's been a member of the School Site Council. After discussing the potential impact of the budget cuts at the Council meeting last month, Schneir -- who has participated in protests against the war in Iraq, immigrant rights and other issues, but never on school issues -- decided to help circulate petitions and organize a protest in front of the school this week.

Goulding and Schneir will be traveling to Sacramento on Monday to join other parents, teachers, and school board members from across the state at a rally at the State Capitol building. They were selected because their schools won a competition for collecting the most signatures on petitions protesting the budget cuts.

At the state level, the California Teachers Association, the California School Board Association, and the PTA are coordinating the lobbying efforts in Sacramento, although the local protests have resulted from indigenous activism. Although both the state Senate and Assembly have Democratic majorities, a two-thirds vote in both houses is needed to pass a budget. As a result, the school protesters need to identify two (out of 15) Republicans in the 40-member Senate and six (out of 32) Republicans in the 80-member Assembly who will go along with some combination of cuts and increased taxes -- a difficult goal given the hard-line conservatism of the state's GOP legislators. The CTA, CSBA and PTA strategists have yet to identify which Republicans they believe are most vulnerable to pressure and seek to mobilize parents, teachers, and other school employees in those districts.

In other words, a handful of right-wing GOP legislators, plus the Republican governor, are standing in the way of my kids' schools getting the funding they need.

Schwarzenegger wants to broker a deal but has been reluctant to propose any significant tax increases, despite a \$15 billion deficit due to both a weaker-than-anticipated state economy (caused in large measure by the mortgage meltdown and declining housing prices) and the state's inefficient tax system. The core of Schwarzenegger's budget is a gimmick to ask voters for permission to borrow \$15 billion from Wall Street against future earnings of the state lottery, but even that plan -- which simply postpones the budget crisis rather than solves it -- won't restore the funds being slashed for public schools, much less bring California even close to the national average in per-student spending.

Misguided state tax policies have exacerbated the state's current fiscal crisis. According to the California Budget Project (CBP), a nonprofit policy group, tax cuts enacted between 1993 and 2006 cost the state \$12. billion this year. The largest reductions included the cut in the motor vehicle license fees (Schwarzenegger's ploy to get elected in 2003) and cuts in the corporate tax rate reduction. Corporate income taxes have declined as a share of the state's general fund revenues and as a share of corporate profits. If corporations had paid the same share of their profits in corporate taxes in 2005 as they did in 1981, corporate tax collections would be \$7.3 billion higher, according to CBP calculations. As the state's economy has shifted from goods to services, the state's tax system hasn't adjusted - for example, the rise of the internet sales that escape taxation. If taxable purchases accounted for the same share of personal income this year as they did 40 years ago, the state would collect an additional \$15.9 billion in sales tax revenues. In addition, the phase-out of the federal estate tax -- President Bush's give-away to the very rich -- will cost California over \$1.1 billion this year.

Like many parents, I'm tired of going to silent auctions and bake sales at my kids' public schools to make sure there's enough money to keep the art teacher, purchase musical instruments and library books, and install computers in classrooms. But meanwhile, I'll be taking out the Magic Markers and helping my daughters design more protest posters, realizing that this isn't just about saving our schools, but teaching them a lesson about democracy.

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