

LEARN HOW TO BE HAPPIER AT WORK—TODAY

themuse

HUFF
POST

The Third Metric

Delivered straight
to your inbox

SIGN UP

FOR A FREE CLASS

June 12, 2014

HUFF
POST

LOS ANGELES

Who Are the Billionaires Trying to Defeat Steve Zimmer?

Posted: 03/03/2013 10:44 am

Some of America's most powerful corporate plutocrats -- including Bill Gates, Michael Bloomberg, Eli Broad, and the Walton family (heirs to the Walmart fortune) -- want to take over the Los Angeles school system and Steve Zimmer, a former teacher and feisty school board member, is in their way. So they've hired Kate Anderson to get rid of him. No, she's not a hired assassin like the kind on *The Sopranos*. She's a lawyer and school parent who the billionaires picked to run against Zimmer. As a result, the race for the District 4 seat -- which stretches from the Westside to the West San Fernando Valley -- is ground zero in this battle over the corporate take-over of public education. The outcome of Tuesday's election has national implications in terms of the billionaires' battle to reconstruct public education in the corporate mold.

The corporate big-wigs are part of an effort that they and the media misleadingly call "school reform." What they're really after is not "reform" (improving our 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.

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 is used to getting what it wants in business and politics and they've created a web of organizations designed to persuade the public, other business folks, and politicians that running school districts like corporations is the way to go. They've 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, LA's Promise, Parent Revolution, and the Los Angeles Fund for Public Education -- all front groups designed to sell their version of "school reform."

The Los Angeles Unified School District is the second largest school system in the country with over 800,000 students. So gaining control of its board -- and its budget -- is a good "investment" for the billionaires who want to reshape education in this country. Not surprisingly, Kate Anderson is funded by some of the same corporate titans, corporate-backed political groups, and Republicans who financed George W. Bush's and Arnold Schwarzenegger's efforts to privatize our schools.

The billionaires are financing candidates who support John Deasey, the CEO (oops -- superintendent) who came to LAUSD from his former perch at the Gates Foundation. They are particularly worried that Zimmer would be a fourth vote (out of seven board members) to fire Deasey, although he's actually been supportive of Deasey on many issues. So they've poured the most money into their effort to oust Zimmer from his District 4 seat.

That battle has turned into a remarkable David vs. Goliath contest. But let's recall who won that Biblical battle. Goliath had the big weapons but the feisty David had the slingshot.

The billionaires' major battle armor is the Coalition for School Reform, a political front group through which they can donate unlimited bucks in hopes of helping their favored candidates, in part by funding TV ads and mailers. The Coalition is backing several candidates for LA school board but the most hotly-contested (and expensive) race is Anderson's campaign to defeat Zimmer. The billionaires' money is being spent to pay for what *LA Times* columnist Steve Lopez has called "junk ads" that include "serious exaggeration and distortion." Anderson's backers are outspending Zimmer's supporters, including the teachers union, by a huge margin. What Zimmer has going for him is a grassroots campaign led by parents, former students, and local activists who are walking precincts, making phone calls, and hosting house meetings.

In the world of LA educational politics, the billionaires view United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) as the bogeyman that has sought to thwart Deasey's corporate-style changes. UTLA sees itself not only protecting teachers' pay, benefits and professional autonomy, but also working to improve student learning by reducing class sizes and resisting the "teach to the test" obsession. UTLA has often been its own worst enemy in terms of its clumsy public relations. But it is because of UTLA and other teachers unions that teaching became a profession that attracted bright college graduates who could earn a middle-class salary.

That's not how the Billionaires Boys Club sees it. Thanks to their assault on teachers' unions, helped by their allies in politics and the media, many Los Angeles voters view teachers unions in general -- and UTLA in particular -- as defending "incompetent" teachers who ought to be fired.

In the battles between the Deasey faction and the UTLA faction on the school board, Zimmer has been a bridge builder, not a

zealot for either side. He has sided with Deasey on some issues and with UTLA on others, and tried gallantly, and often successfully, to bring the two sides together. Zimmer, wrote *Times* columnist Lopez:

"... has tried to bridge differences among the warring parties, winning supporters and making enemies on both sides in the process. But there's a price to pay for independence, it seems. Zimmer is under attack by the [Mayor Antonio] Villaraigosa-aligned Coalition for School Reform, which supports Zimmer's opponent Kate Anderson. They see Anderson, an attorney and LA Unified parent, as more inclined to butt heads with the union and more likely to support Deasy."

Zimmer voted to renew Deasey's contract and has generally been supportive, but he's also disagreed with Deasey on occasion. He has been, in other words, the "swing" vote on the board.

But the billionaires don't want a swing vote. They want a compliant rubber stamp, and that's what they think they've found in Anderson.

The Coalition for School Reform's list of contributors reads like a who's who of corporate influence-peddlers.

- New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has thrown one million dollars into the Coalition for School Reform war chest
- Real estate and insurance magnate Eli Broad contributed \$250,000.
- Former Univision head Jerrold Prenchio wrote another \$250,000 check. (Last year he spent \$800,000 backing the anti-union Proposition 32, which California voters defeated).
- StudentsFirst, a corporate-funded lobby group headed by Michelle Rhee, the discredited former head of the Washington, DC school system, pitched in with another \$250,000.
- Joel Klein, the former New York City school chancellor who now works for Rupert Murdoch's education division, which includes Wireless Generation (rebranded as Amplify), donated \$50,000. (Klein also is on the board of StudentsFirst).
- Anshutz Corporation, the Denver-based developer that built Staples Center, owns several local sports teams, and paid for the anti-teacher propaganda film *Won't Back Down*, ponied up \$100,000 to a previous incarnation of the Coalition for School Reform.
- Jamie Alter Lynton, wife of Michael Lynton, CEO of Sony Pictures, donated \$100,000. She's married to Michael Lynton, chairman and chief executive officer of Sony Pictures Entertainment.
- Entertainment executive Casey Wasserman donated \$100,000.
- Jeffrey Katzenberg, head of Dreamworks, transferred \$50,000 from his small-change account to the Coalition for School Reform's coffers.
- Megan Chernin, a director of LA Promise, threw \$100,000 into the kitty. Her husband, Peter Chernin, is a former executive of Murdoch's News Corporation and now runs the Chernin Group, \$400 million entertainment investment fund.
- Stephen Prough of Salem Partners contributed \$10,000. He also chairs the board of LA's Promise, which manages three large LAUSD schools.
- 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.

What, exactly, do these corporate moguls want and what has Zimmer done to make them so upset?

In terms of the big picture, what they want is to turn public schools into educational Walmarts 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.

Much of the billionaires' schools agenda is driven by ideology and hubris. They honestly believe, like the Divine Right of Kings, that their success in the corporate world entitles them to restructure our public schools. They think that making profits in corporate board rooms gives them credentials to make changes in classrooms. Some of their contributors don't pretend to know anything about school matters, but when one of their influential pals phones them to ask for a donation, they take out their checkbook. This is called the philanthropic *quid quo pro*. Next month, they may ask their friend to return the favor on behalf of one of *their* favorite causes.

For some of these billionaires bankrollers, however, school "reform" is simply another version of old-fashioned corporate cronyism, sometimes called conflicts of interest. As noted above, Joel Klein works for media titan Rupert Murdoch's Amplify corporation. That's the company that under its former name Wireless Generation, created DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills), a student assessment tool, that has a huge contract with LAUSD. It is any wonder that part of the corporate-backed school "reform" agenda is hyper-emphasis on standardized testing?

There are many other textbook and test-making companies involved in the conflict-of-interest lottery. For example, Les Biller, who is CEO of Knowledge Universe, founded by junk bond king Michael Milken, donated \$25,000 to the Coalition for School Reform. Knowledge Universe's web site claims it is the "largest private early childhood education (ECE) provider in the U.S."

The *Los Angeles Times* has consistently drunk the Billionaires Boys Club's Kool-Aid. The paper has been a huge advocate -- in its news pages as well as its editorial pages -- of standardized testing to evaluate teachers and students. It has also been a fierce knee-jerk opponent of United Teachers of Los Angeles. Although the *Times* called Zimmer a "thoughtful board member with a yearning to bridge the gap between union and reform camps," the paper endorsed Anderson.

In its editorial ,the *Times* acknowledged that it had "some concerns" about Anderson. It wrote:

"In her work with Children Now, she fought for legislation on teacher dismissals that she clearly didn't fully understand, and, in an interview with the editorial board, gave an inaccurate description of how it would work. She was quick to own up to the mistake, but it's disturbing that a lawyer would lobby for a bill without having vetted it thoroughly."

Zimmer was elected to the LAUSD in 2009 after 17 years as a teacher and counselor at Marshall High School. He began his career in 1992 as part of Teach For America. When he taught English as a second language, he used an experiential approach that related to his students' daily lives. He created Marshall's Public Service Program to make public service intrinsic to the student experience. He founded Marshall's Multilingual Teacher Career Academy, which was an early model for LAUSD's Career Ladder Teacher Academy. To help address the concerns of at-risk youth, he founded the Comprehensive Student Support Center to provide health care services for students and their families. He helped create the Elysian Valley Community Services Center, a community owned-and-operated agency that provides after-school, recreational and enrichment programs, a library, and free Internet access.

Like most reasonable educators and education analysts, Zimmer has questioned the efficacy of charter schools as a panacea. Research shows that their track record is mixed at best. In four years on the board, Zimmer only voted against granting or renewing one charter school. But he's also called for a moratorium on more charters until the school district comes up with a strategic plan to figure out where it is going with charters. This kind of reasonable approach doesn't sit well with the Billionaires Boys Club.

Zimmer has also questioned the over-reliance on high-stakes standardized testing as the primary tool for assessing student and teacher performance. Testing has its place but it can also become an excuse to avoid more useful and holistic ways to evaluate students and teachers -- and to avoid the "teach to the test" obsession that hampers learning and creative teaching. Zimmer has called for -- and helped negotiate the deal for -- some portion of teacher evaluations to include test scores. But that's not what the Billionaire Boys Club wants.

Although Zimmer has often been sympathetic to UTLA, he is hardly their lapdog. He has disagreed with UTLA enough that its leaders wavered about whether even to endorse him for re-election. They eventually did vote to back him, but he remains an independent voice.

Of course, UTLA is not the reason for LAUSD's problems. The biggest reason is inadequate resources. California ranks about 47th among states in per-student spending on public education. In terms of class size, libraries, teachers, counselors, and other key components of good schools, California is near the bottom. The overwhelming majority of LAUSD students come from low-income families, many of them where English is not their primary language, where kids come to school hungry, where families have no health insurance. Because of LA's high-priced housing market, many low-income LAUSD families move frequently due to rent increases, causing their children to move from school to school, which undermines their ability to learn. Ineffective management is another problem facing public education and LAUSD in particular. LAUSD always seems to be in the midst of administrative shake-ups.

As a School Board member, Zimmer has been the leading advocate for vulnerable students. He authored the school board resolution in support of the Dream Act, federal legislation that would provide a path to citizenship for undocumented students who do well in school and attend college. He helped create Student Recovery Day, a twice-yearly event that takes scores of district staff into students' homes to support students who have dropped out. Hundreds of students have returned to class after being sought out and connected with the support services they need. He championed the Education Jobs Bill, legislation that added \$10 billion for state education systems. Zimmer has received numerous awards for his work with children and families, including the LA's Commission of Children, Youth and their Families "Angel Over Los Angeles" award, El Centro Del Pueblo's "Carino" award and the LACER Foundation's "Jackie Goldberg Public Service Award."

Zimmer, who views himself as a moderate, was initially shocked by the corporate titans' decision to put a bulls eye on his back. But he and his many supporters have waged a feisty grassroots campaign. If he wins, it will be a major blow to the Billionaires Boys Club, and a victory for real bottom-up grassroots educational 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).

Follow Peter Dreier on Twitter: www.twitter.com/peterdreier