

## The Battle over School Funding: The View from Pasadena

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Tony Gordo, Ruth Strick, Cushon Bell, and George Brumder spent much of February, March, and April 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

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of the Pasadena Educational Foundation, which raises funds for the public schools, and chaired the CC campaign committee.

These four unlikely collaborators 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, a 42-year-old parent of three PUSD students

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of Kansas, second edition, 2005), *Regions That Work: How Cities and Suburbs Can Grow Together* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), and *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City* (University of California Press, second edition, 2006). He is co-editor of *Up Against the Sprawl: Public Policy and the Making of Southern California* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004). He has two children in PUSD schools and served on the Measure CC campaign steering committee. He earned his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago.

—and several part-time organizers, who were trained in grassroots mobilization by Jared Rivera, a veteran organizer with LA Voice, part of the PICO national network of community organizations.

When the ballots were counted after May 4, Measure CC received 53.7% of the vote. That is 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.

Due to state budget cuts, PUSD faced a \$23 million budget deficit beginning in the fall of 2010, and had to submit its budget by June. Without the \$7 million each year that CC would have raised, PUSD, which has about 20,000 students, has been forced to make drastic cuts. All school libraries, summer school, advanced placement classes, were immediately on the chopping block. Class sizes will increase. Music, theater, and art programs will take a hit. The week after Measure CC lost, PUSD sent lay-off notices to 207 teachers, librarians, nurses, counselors, psychologists, administrators, clerical and maintenance workers.

### California's School Funding Straightjacket

The battle for Measure CC reflects a number of dilemmas regarding the current condition of public education in the United States, and especially in California. The

federal government only contributes about 9% of the nation's public school funding. States provide slightly less than half of all K-12 funding, while local governments generally contribute about 44% of total. America's public schools are chronically underfunded, but the recession has deepened the crisis. Nationwide, as many as 300,000 teachers could lose their jobs before the 2010-2011 school year begins.

Until the 1970s, California's public schools were mostly funded by local property taxes. Local voters could use their influence over local school boards to determine local property tax rates. Although this reflected the strong U.S. tradition of "local control," it also led to significant inequities, due to the wide variations in wealth between affluent and poor communities.

Since the late 1970s, funding for public schools in California has been primarily a state matter, but public schools are still governed by local school boards. Parents, teachers, and other groups concerned about the day-to-day governance of the schools—including salaries, class sizes, facilities and equipment, and other matters—look to locally elected school boards for redress, but school boards have limited control over the overall size of their school budgets.

It has become commonplace to note that California's K-12 public schools—once among the best in the nation—are now among the worst. A Rand Corporation study,

issued in 2005, observed that "there is widespread concern that California's schools have slipped in quality over the years and that they are no longer performing as well as they did previously or as well as schools in other states."<sup>1</sup> Since that report, California has slipped ever further down the rankings, due in large part to the declining and low level of funding for public education.

California is the 7th wealthiest state in the country (in terms of 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. California's eighth graders came in next to last (just above Mississippi) in reading and ranked 45th (tied with West Virginia) in math. The state ranks 30th in the percentage of ninth graders who graduate from high school. Just half the state's students test as proficient in English language arts and 46% test as proficient in math. Several recent studies coordinated by Stanford University researchers concluded that California's schools would need 53% to 71% more funding to provide students with the education necessary to meet the federal No Child Left

Behind goals for 2011–12. The same series of reports also concluded that the state's schools need to increase funding by 40% to reach California's own achievement goals for schools. They also said that schools with significant numbers of low-income student need much more funding than predominantly middle-class schools in order to reach the same results.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this, the state cut \$17 billion from public education in the past two years and, as of May 2010, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed cutting another \$2.4 billion this year. The current recession has exacerbated the state budget crisis and deepened the school funding crisis. As of May 2010, more than 26,000 California teachers had already received pink slips for the following fall.

This situation is exacerbated by the state's general fiscal straightjacket as well as specific efforts to reform school funding that have, for the most part, backfired. K-12 public school funding is a state matter primarily because of two changes in state law. The first was the California Supreme Court's ruling in *Serrano v. Priest* in 1971 that declared that state's school finance system to be unconstitutional. Originally filed by a class of Los Angeles County public school parents and students, the court ruled that relying on local property taxes to fund local schools violated the constitution because of the wide variations in school quality that it produced. When the

state legislature failed to carry out an adequate school funding equalization plan, the state Supreme Court issued its *Serrano II* decision in 1976, ordering the state legislature to implement a funding formula that reduced the spending disparities between school districts. The *Serrano II* decision resulted in a major turnabout, shifting responsibility for K-12 funding from local to state government.

Then, in 1978, California voters passed Proposition 13, which capped property taxes and made it extremely difficult to raise revenues. As a result, even before the current recession, California had steadily disinvested in its once world-class education system (including its state universities) and its physical infrastructure. Proposition 13 did more than simply limit property taxes. It created a constitutional requirement that all tax increases pass the legislature by a two-thirds majority. (The state already had a two-thirds requirement to pass the annual budget, dating back to 1933). As a result, California is the only state that requires a supermajority for both tax increases and budget approval. Although the Democrats have a significant majority of both houses of the state legislature, they lack the two-thirds needed to pass a budget and raise taxes, giving the Republican legislators—strongly opposed to raising taxes—considerable leverage. As a result, each year the leaders of both parties in Sacramento get together and play chicken with the state budget, dar-

ing each other to bring the state to the brink of fiscal collapse. In the last two budget cycles, while the governor and the legislature were negotiating to pass a budget, the state was forced to hand out IOUs instead of cash payments to contractors, state workers, and aid recipients.<sup>3</sup>

By the mid-1980s, California's per-student K-12 spending had slipped far below the national average. Although per-student spending grew for a few years in the late 1990s, it remained below the national norm. During the past several years, its ranking on various indicators of public school financing sunk further and further.

The major statewide advocacy groups for public education—most notably, the California Teachers Association (CTA), the state Parent Teachers Association (PTA), and the California School Boards Association (CSBA)—lack the political influence to make public school funding a higher priority. Frustrated by their inability to change spending priorities through political activism, on May 20 a coalition of public education advocates—the CSBA, the state PTA, the Association of California School Administrators, nine school districts, and more than 60 public school students—filed a suit against Gov. Schwarzenegger and the state government arguing that the state does not give schools enough money to achieve that state's academic standards. (This makes California the 34<sup>th</sup> state to file an "adequacy" suit around public school spending levels).<sup>4</sup>

### The Parcel Tax Revolution

The *Serrano* decision made some inroads in narrowing the disparities between rich and poor school districts, but Proposition 13 lowered the overall level of per-student funding across the state. Faced with this reality, what can local residents do? To address this dilemma, Californians invented the parcel tax. Parcel taxes are a form of property tax. They are paid by owners of property. The parcel tax has been used by local government, community college districts, school districts, and other local entities to raise revenues. According to Duncombe and Yinger, California is the only state that allows parcel taxes as a method of funding schools.<sup>5</sup>

However, the authors of Proposition 13, foreseeing the potential for local governments to use parcel taxes to circumvent the tax-reducing mission of the proposition, included several constraints on the use of local parcel taxes. For example, unlike the standard property tax, which is based on the value of the property, a parcel tax is a flat tax. It is the same for every parcel, whether it is a multimillion dollar mansion, a small bungalow, a large office building, or a small business property. The regressivity of the parcel tax is an unattractive feature that makes it difficult for public school advocates trying to adopt them in local communities. Also, to hinder the use of local parcel taxes to raise revenues, Proposition 13 requires local governing

districts to get the approval of two-thirds of the voters, a difficult threshold. A parcel tax is one way for local communities raise additional revenues for their schools. But the antigovernment 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.

Despite these obstacles, 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 have been 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. In 2009, 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

shortfall out of its \$29.5 million budget. To help fill the gap, the San Marino Schools Foundation is asking every family in the district to make a voluntary \$2,000 contribution per student. Certainly it is voluntary, but peer pressure makes it likely that a significant proportion of public school families will do so.

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%). Pasadenans resent comparisons between PUSD and these neighboring districts, whose students generally have higher API (Academic Performance Index) scores.

Larger urban school districts don't fare as well when they ask voters to tax themselves to fund public schools. In 2009, 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. (See Table 1) Among the state's largest school districts, only Oakland, San Francisco, and West Contra Costa have passed parcel taxes.

On May 4, 2010, seven 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, Union, and Lakeside (Santa Clara County), and Menlo Park and Portola (San Mateo County)—are all

**Table 1. Parcel Tax Elections in School Districts in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties in 2009**

District/county	Date	# Students	Median House-Hold Income in the Community	% Students Eligible For Free And Reduced Meals	% Students Who Are English Language Learners	Total Size of Parcel Taxes	% yes Votes (66.7% Needed To Pass)
San Marino/LA	May 2009	3,202	\$154,263*	1.3	4.4	\$1,090	71.1
South Pasadena/LA	June 2009	4,258	\$ 80,283	8.6	7.1	\$ 288	67.3
La Canada-Flintridge/LA	June 2009	4,023	\$144,689*	1.0	5.2	\$ 150	74.7
Palos Verdes/LA	June 2009	12,033	\$127,616	1.5	7.2	\$ 165	68.6
Culver City/LA	November 2009	6,684	\$ 70,652	36.0	14.5	\$ 96	74.7
Rowland/LA	June 2009	16,485	\$ 63,344	58.4	34.1	\$ 120	51.6
Long Beach/LA	November 2009	87,509	\$ 52,839	68.2	23.7	\$ 92	43.0
Oxnard K-8/Ventura	November 2009	15,400	\$ 60,157	78.8	50.0	\$ 99	46.8

Note: Household income data are from U.S. Census American Community Survey 2006–2008 estimates except those with asterisk (\*), which come from City-Data.Com and are estimates for 2008. Data on size of school districts, % eligible for free-and-reduced meals, and % English language learners are from Ed-Data <[www.ed-data.k12.ca.us](http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us)>. Data are for 2008–2009.

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. PUSD was one of two school districts whose parcel tax campaigns failed. (The other—Loma Prieta Elementary—is a very wealthy district that has only two schools and 400 students). (See Table 2.)

In other words, local parcel taxes—in combination with the capacity of affluent communities to raise private funds (often through local nonprofit educational foundations)—widens the rich-poor school funding divide, contrary to the intent of the *Serrano* ruling. 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 districts—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).

Every New Year's day, millions of Americans watch the colorful floats and marching bands of the Rose Parade on television, then settle in to view the Rose Bowl football game. Both take place in Pasadena, a city memorialized in the song, "Little Old Lady From Pasadena," popularized in the 1960s by both Jan and Dean and the Beach Boys. But less than half a mile from where the parade route begins, near Millionaires Row, is northwest Pasadena, a predominantly Latino and black section with a high concentration of poor residents.

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.



**Table 2. All School Parcel Tax Elections in California in May 2010**

District/County	Date	# Students	Median Household Income in the Community	% Students Eligible for Free & Reduced Meals	% Students Who Are English Language Learners	Total Size of Parcel Taxes	% Yes Votes (66.7% Needed)
Acalanes Union HS/ Contra Costa	May 2010	5,714	\$96,662	1.1	1.5	\$301	68.5
Palo Alto Unified/Santa Clara	May 2010	11,430	\$121,758	7.7	9.9	\$589	79.3
Fremont Union HS/ Santa Clara	May 2010	10,339	\$102,273	10.2	10.1	\$98	72.2
Union Elementary/ Santa Clara	May 2010	4,576	\$96,575	13.5	12.7	\$96	72.2
Menlo Park Elementary/San Mateo	May 2010	2,409	\$129,522	4.2	7.6	\$743	76.2
Portola Valley Elementary/San Mateo	May 2010	737	\$190,241	7.1	3.8	\$458	77.0
Lakeside Joint K-8/ Santa Clara	May 2010	82	\$68,317	6.1	1.2	\$311	67.7
Loma Prieta Elementary/Santa Clara & Santa Cruz	May 2010	405	\$127,039*	4.2	2.7	\$95	65.5
Pasadena Unified/LA	May 2010	20,526	\$69,144	66.0	21.0	\$120	53.8

Note: Household income data are from U.S. Census American Community Survey 2006–2008 estimates. Data on size of school districts, % eligible for free-and-reduced meals, and % English language learners are from Ed-Data <[www.ed-data.k12.ca.us](http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us)>. Data are for 2008–2009.

\*Loma Prieta Joint Union Elementary School District consists of one elementary and one middle school, both in Los Gatos. The income figure is for Los Gatos. Voters in the district had previously rejected a \$150/year parcel tax in 2001, with 61% of the vote. The May 2010 vote was 1,008 yes (65.5%) and 532 no. There is also a Los Gatos Union Elementary School District with four elementary schools and one middle school with 2,818 students. It passed parcel taxes in 1990 and extended it in 1994, 1998 and 2002. In June 2008 voters extended the parcel tax again, at \$290/year for six years, with 67% of the vote. There is also a Los Gatos-Saratoga Joint Union High School District with two high schools and 3,178 students. The district is now considering a parcel tax for the first time.

A 1939 Columbia University study ranked Pasadena as the nation's most livable city. It was wealthy, well-planned and conservative. In 1950, at the height of the Cold War, a small group of local conservatives defeated a school tax measure and ousted the superintendent who was a prominent advocate of progressive education and racial integration. A 1951 book about that controversy observed that Pasadena had a reputation for being "rich, reactionary, and Republican."<sup>6</sup> Reflecting this conservative mentality, 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 bungalows, 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 nonprofit museums, arts, music, and cultural organizations, and social service agencies that provide the city's affluent residents with 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 George Brumder, chair of the Pasadena Educational Foundation and chair of the Measure CC campaign, 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. There are many cultural organizations supported by these minority groups (such as the Latino Forum), and many nonprofit social agencies that serve low-income residents,

but no grassroots organization that mobilizes low-income Pasadenans, Altadenans, and Sierra Madreans to exercise political 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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. Almost one-third (31.9%) of school-age children attend one of the area’s many private schools.<sup>9</sup> (This is almost three times the national proportion of students attending private school—10.9%). Over many years, realtors, the local newspaper, private preschools, 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, the Pasadena Educational Foundation 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 civic leaders to support PUSD.<sup>10</sup>

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. Around the same time, 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.

In 2006, PUSD parents and community allies formed Invest in PUSD Kids (IIPK) to use community organizing strategies and tactics 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 the Pasadena, Sierra Madre, and Altadena governing bodies.

In 2008, 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. IIPK sponsored a public forum, attended by more than 300 people, including several City Council and School Board members, to hear from officials in Burbank, Santa Monica, and San Francisco about their partnership initiatives, and to put the issue on Pasadena's civic agenda. That year, IIPK 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. In August 2009, in response to a misleading and inaccurate negative portrayal of PUSD in the *Pasadena Star News*—which misreported that the district's API scores had declined when in fact they had risen—IIPK mobilized several hundred members to call and email the newspaper's editors. In an unprecedented turn of events, the paper issued a front-page correction and apology for inaccuracies in the story

and printed a second front-page story with accurate information.

The PUSD schools started to turn around in the early 2000s. That progress accelerated under Superintendent Edwin Diaz, recruited by the School Board from Gilroy to replace Dr. Percy Clark, who as superintendent had initiated a "back to basics" curriculum but whose hands-off management style and other problems made his tenure increasingly controversial. Since Diaz 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 (API). 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 L.A. 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**

With the state government slashing funding each year, Diaz began making cuts to administrative staff and some support programs. Between 2008 and 2010, PUSD revenues declined by \$25 million, or 15%. State budget cuts accounted for 94% of this loss, while 6% was due to declining enrollment. During that period, PUSD “cut district-level executive positions by 26%, centralized and school administrative support positions by 16.5%, maintenance staff by 13%, and clerical and office staff by 12.6%. Since 2008, only 6% of teachers have been laid off. By directing the majority of resources to classroom instruction, PUSD has established an administrator to teacher ratio 31% below the level recommended by the state.” According to Supt. Diaz, “Currently, PUSD spends less than 5% of its budget on general administration, lower than the majority of districts in California.”<sup>11</sup>

Then, in late 2009, with the recession worsening and state revenues plummeting, Gov. Schwarzenegger proposed even deeper cuts for public schools. 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. 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.

The CC supporters had reason to believe they could buck the odds against passing a parcel tax in a school district with PUSD’s demographic profile. In November 2008, more than 75% of voters had approved a \$350 million 10-year facilities bond to repair PUSD’s schools, which suffered from decades of deferred maintenance. That vote, called Measure TT, triggered no organized opposition. Its overwhelming victory was certainly helped by the fact that the Obama-McCain presidential election took place on the same day, increasing voter turnout to record levels in the predominantly Democratic district, especially among the sizable Black population. The PUSD board, administrators, and supporters viewed the Measure TT outcome as a vote of confidence in the public school system, which they hoped would transfer from a facilities bond to a parcel tax to pay for operating costs.<sup>12</sup>

Before the school board decided to launch its Measure TT facilities bond campaign, it commissioned a poll of likely voters to gauge if they had an appetite for a facilities bond, a parcel tax, or both. The poll indicated that the facilities bond (which under state law requires only a 55% margin to pass) was more likely to win than a parcel tax

(which requires a two-thirds margin to pass). A year after Measure TT had passed, in late 2009, the school board commissioned another poll to gauge potential support for a parcel tax. The poll found that 64% of likely voters would definitely or probably vote yes on a parcel tax—not two-thirds, but close enough to make victory possible. Based on that poll, and the promise of an energetic grassroots volunteer effort, the PUSD school board voted in January 2010 to put the \$120/year (for five years) parcel tax on the May 4, 2010 ballot, hired a consultant who had run successful parcel tax campaigns elsewhere, and launched the campaign.<sup>13</sup>

Private citizens created a new umbrella group, Citizens for Quality Schools, to raise money and run the campaign. The steering committee included several former and current school board members, leaders of several organizations that support public schools (including the Pasadena Educational Foundation, Pasadena Education Network, Invest in PUSD Kids), the union representing PUSD teachers (United Teachers of Pasadena), members of groups such as the NAACP, the League of Women Voters, and others. George Brumder, the retired attorney who is president of PEF, chaired Citizens for Quality Schools.

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 (at the homes of voters identified by phonebankers as likely to vote “yes”) during the last few weeks of the campaign. The campaign also sponsored robocalls (phone calls with taped messages) from Pasadena Mayor Bill Bogaard and (in Spanish and English) Pasadena City Council member Victor Gordo, as well as letters to Armenian and Spanish surname high-propensity voters.

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, L.A. 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, and five of them published an op-ed column in the *Star-News* with that message.

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 who live in the PUSD area have no direct connection to the public schools. 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 promote Measure CC with several major themes. One was that a healthy community needs good schools. The campaign repeated the theme that the quality of public schools significantly affects property values, even for those without kids in PUSD, and that a \$120/year “investment” (the parcel tax) would be more than offset by higher housing values. The campaign 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 misinformation spread by CC’s opponents. The “no” effort was led by Ross Selvidge (a economist for C. B. Richard Ellis, a real estate consulting firm, and a Republican Party activist) and by several conservative 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 opposition’s flyers and letters claimed, for example, that PUSD did not 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 aver-



age 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.<sup>14</sup>

The opponents lacked a grassroots base, had few volunteers, and did almost no phone banking or door-knocking. Nevertheless, they were able to circulate their views 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 two slick flyers to voters, although he refused to disclose the list of his donors to the local newspaper. (The "yes" campaign raised more money—about \$300,000—mailed five flyers to voters, and listed its contributors on its website). It isn't clear, however, how much difference the opposition effort really made in terms of the outcome of the election. The repetition of their arguments in the local newspapers, augmented by the Chamber of Commerce's opposition, may have contributed to some "swing" voters deciding to cast a "no" vote.

The second factor—the timing of Measure CC—was probably more responsible for the outcome than what either side was able to do to sway voters. 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 rise of the Tea Party, which has a small but loud presence in the Pasadena area—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 had anticipated to persuade voters to vote for Measure CC.

The turnout for Measure CC was extraordinarily high. More than 30,000 people—about one-quarter of all eligible voters—cast ballots. This is a very 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% of all those eligible). The high turnout certainly attracted "no" as well as "yes" voters. Since the opposition campaign had few resources to mobilize voters, most of the "no" voters mailed in their ballots because they were highly motivated to do so.

The voters with the most direct link to PUSD—school parents—represented a small proportion of eligible voters.

There are 13,625 families (or households) with children in PUSD. A PUSD official estimates that this translates to about 20,000 parents, an unknown proportion of whom are not citizens and ineligible to vote. The campaign lacked the resources to forge a voter registration campaign among the unregistered PUSD parents or any other voters. But the campaign did identify roughly 8,000 PUSD parents who were registered to vote. About one-quarter of them voted—roughly the same proportion as the overall electorate. The CC campaign, however, did not simply focus on PUSD parents, but also on voters who told phonebankers they were likely “yes” votes—disproportionately Democrats, renters, low-income households, and black and Latino voters, as well as PUSD parents and employees.

Without exit polls, it is impossible to say for sure which demographic groups turned out in high and low numbers, but a precinct-level analysis of the vote suggests that voter turnout was relatively low, but overwhelmingly “yes,” in black and Latino neighborhoods. (See Table 3).

Overall, 54.7% of Pasadena voters supported Measure CC, but the support varied significantly by City Council district. The three Council districts in the city’s northwest area—where the city’s Black, Latino, and low-income residents disproportionately live and which are represented by the two African Americans (Chris Holden and Jacqui Robinson) and one Latino (Victor Gordo) who serve on the City Council—had the lowest turnout but the highest level

of support for Measure CC. In District 3, 17.3% of eligible voters voted and Measure CC received 73% of the vote; in District 5, the figures were 20.4% and 68.2%; and in District 1, they were 21.4% and 61.6%. In the two wealthiest City Council districts, turnout was higher and support for Measure CC lower. In District 4, 34.6% of voters turned out and only 44.6% supported Measure CC; in District 6, 33.5% of voters turned out and 49.5% of them voted “yes.”

The “yes” vote was even weaker in Sierra Madre, which is much smaller but more affluent than either Pasadena or Altadena. In Sierra Madre, 43.6% of voters supported Measure CC, but turnout reached 34%. In Altadena, with a sizable population of African Americans, turnout was 27.6% and the “yes” vote reached 57.6%.

Given the obstacles it faced, the fact that Measure CC garnered almost 54% of the vote was quite an accomplishment. Clearly the CC campaign’s grassroots mobilization—targeting low-propensity voters as well as likely “yes” high-propensity voters, and thus increasing turnout among those groups—made a difference. Without it, the Measure CC might have failed to win even half the votes. But the vote analysis suggests that the potential support for Measure CC was greater than the campaign was able to mobilize. The Measure CC campaign did not have the resources needed to reach many potential “yes” voters—particularly among black, Latino, and low-income residents—who failed to mail in their ballots.

**Table 3. Measure CC Vote by Geographic Area**

Areas	Number of Registered Voters	Number of Voters Who Cast Ballots	% of Voters Who Cast Ballots (Turnout)	% of Voters Who Voted Yes
PASADENA				
DISTRICT 1 (Robinson)	9,454	2,024	21.4	61.6
DISTRICT 2 (McAustin)	10,311	2,929	28.4	58.4
DISTRICT 3 (Holden)	7,966	1,380	17.3	73.0
DISTRICT 4 (Haderlein)	12,252	4,241	34.6	44.6
DISTRICT 5 (Gordo)	6,739	1,377	20.4	68.2
DISTRICT 6 (Madison)	14,086	4,722	33.5	49.5
DISTRICT 7 (Tornek)	11,144	3,185	28.6	54.1
TOTAL FOR PASADENA	71,952	19,858	27.60	54.67
SIERRA MADRE	7,672	2,604	33.94	43.61
ALTADENA	26,839	7,425	27.66	56.74
OTHER UNINCORPORATED AREAS*	5,952	1,558	26.18	44.69
TOTAL	112,415	31,445	27.97	53.75 (16,845)

\*The unincorporated Chapman Woods and Kinneloa Mesa areas are part of PUSD.

## **Conclusion**

In waging the campaign, the CC activists rallied a broad and diverse constituency behind the public schools. The defeat has triggered a new energy to challenge the chronic underfunding of public education.

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 communitywide 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. Two weeks after Measure CC was defeated, Invest in PUSD Kids held a “community forum” at a school for the campaign’s volunteers, not only to thank them for their work, but to energize them to continue organizing, starting with a campaign to persuade elected officials in Pasadena, Sierra Madre, and Altadena, as well as local businesses, to invest more resources in public schools. They began forming delegations to meet with local officials and to show up at city council meetings, to urge them, for example, to jointly operate parks, playgrounds and athletic facilities, jointly

manage school and community libraries, or help fund health clinics at school sites. The group decided to prioritize a "save the libraries" campaign, since the school board had voted to close all the libraries at the 27 schools, which cost \$1.2 million annually to operate.

PUSD and its community allies may try again to pass a local parcel tax in another year or two. Their efforts, and those of their counterparts across California, would be helped if a ballot measure supported by the state PTA and other groups—to lower the threshold for passing local parcel taxes to 55%—eventually passes. But even if that state-level reform, as well as local parcel tax campaigns, are successful, the root of the problem of California's troubled public schools cannot be remedied at the local level, whether through parcel taxes, increased private donations, or more volunteers at schools. Local activism around parcel taxes and other school issues must eventually translate into action at the state level. They need to organize to change the state law that requires a two-thirds vote for the legislature to pass a budget and raise taxes, and increase state funding for public schools, so that California ranks closer to the middle than the bottom in per-student spending.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Carrol, Cathy Krop, Jeremy Arkes, Peter A. Morrison, and Ann Flanagan, *California's K-12 Public Schools: How Are They Doing?* Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 2005, accessed at <[http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2004/RAND\\_MG186.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2004/RAND_MG186.pdf)>.

<sup>2</sup> Susanna Loeb, Anthony Bryk, and Eric Hanushek, *Getting Down to Facts: School Finance and Governance in California*, Stanford University, March 2007. Accessed at <<http://irepp.stanford.edu/documents/GDF/GDF-Overview-Paper.pdf>>.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Cohen and Peter Dreier, "California in Crisis." *The American Prospect*, February 2010, accessed at <[http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=california\\_in\\_crisis](http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=california_in_crisis)>.

<sup>4</sup> Donna Jones, "Lawsuit seeks to reform state education financing," *San Jose Mercury News*, May 20, 2010; Jill Tucker and Marisa Lagos, "Schools, students sue state over funding," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 21, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> William Duncombe and John Yinger, *Understanding the Incentives in California's Education Finance System*, Stanford University, Institute for Research on Education Policy and Practice, 2007, accessed at <<http://irepp.stanford.edu/documents/GDF/SUMMARIES/Duncombe.pdf>>.

<sup>6</sup> David Hulburd, *This Happened in Pasadena*, New York: The Macmillian Company, 1951, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Julie Salley Gray, "To Fight the Good Fight: " *The Battle Over Control of the Pasadena City Schools, 1969-1979, Essays in History, Volume 37*, Published by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia, 1995, accessed at <[http://www.utofp.org/FormsandDocuments/battle\\_over\\_pasadena\\_schools\\_article.htm](http://www.utofp.org/FormsandDocuments/battle_over_pasadena_schools_article.htm)>; and Rosina A. Lozano, "Brown's Legacy in the West: Pasadena Unified School District's Federally Mandated Desegregation," *Southwestern University Law Review*, Vol. 36, 2007, pages 257-290.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Dreier, "Separate and Unequal," *Pasadena Weekly*, September 13, 2007, accessed at <[http://www.pasadenaweekly.com/cms/story/detail/separate\\_and\\_unequal/5087](http://www.pasadenaweekly.com/cms/story/detail/separate_and_unequal/5087)>.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Census, accessible at <[http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/STTable?\\_bm=y&-context=st&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2008\\_3YR\\_G00\\_S1401&-ds\\_name=ACS\\_2008\\_3YR\\_G00\\_-CONTEXT-st&-tree\\_id=3308&-redoLog=true&-caller=geoselect&-geo\\_id=97000US0629940&-format=&-lang=en](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/STTable?_bm=y&-context=st&-qr_name=ACS_2008_3YR_G00_S1401&-ds_name=ACS_2008_3YR_G00_-CONTEXT-st&-tree_id=3308&-redoLog=true&-caller=geoselect&-geo_id=97000US0629940&-format=&-lang=en)>.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Kahlenberg, *One Pasadena: Tapping the Community's Resources to Strengthen the Public Schools*, Pasadena: Pasadena Educational Foundation, May 2006, accessed at <<http://www.pasedfoundation.org/KahlenbergReport.pdf>>.

<sup>11</sup> Superintendent Edwin Diaz, "Post Measure CC Reality Remains the Same," *Pasadena Star-News*, May 20, 2010, accessed at <[http://www.pasadenastarnews.com/cj\\_15120036](http://www.pasadenastarnews.com/cj_15120036)>.

<sup>12</sup> Under California law, school districts can pass facilities bonds with a 55% threshold and the funds can only be used for physical repairs and new construction, not day-to-day school operations such as teacher and other staff salaries, books and supplies, and equipment like computers. Revenues from parcel taxes, on the other hand, cannot be used for physical facilities. One of the challenges facing the CC campaign was explaining why the school district was asking for what some voters said was "another tax" so soon after Measure TT had passed and before all the construction projects were completed.

<sup>13</sup> On the advice of the consultant, Larry Tramutola, the Measure CC campaign decided to schedule the parcel tax vote as a stand-only ballot measure rather than on the same day as the June gubernatorial and U.S. Senate Republican and Democratic primaries. They were concerned that the publicity over those races would overshadow the Measure CC campaign, but, more importantly, that the hotly contested GOP primaries would be more likely to bring out Republican voters who were not expected to support Measure CC.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Ross Selvidge, "No On CC," *Pasadena Weekly*, March 25, 2010, accessed at <[http://www.pasadenaweekly.com/cms/cms/story/detail/vote\\_no\\_on\\_measure\\_cc/8563/](http://www.pasadenaweekly.com/cms/cms/story/detail/vote_no_on_measure_cc/8563/)>.