



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Feb. 18-22, 2013

L.A. Must Vote

By UCLA IDEA

Are Los Angeles schools unduly influenced by “outside interests”? How about “inside interests”? Or maybe, no interest at all?

According to Warren Fletcher, president of United Teachers of Los Angeles, “voters do not need outsiders deciding who is best to sit on the LAUSD Board of Education.” Those outsiders include nationally prominent, deep-pocketed figures and spokespersons such as Washington, D.C. public schools ex-chancellor Michelle Rhee and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. They and other “reformers” want more charter schools, less involvement of teachers and the community, and miniscule participation of unions in the operations of public schools. Their agenda is not primarily focused on Los Angeles, but rather national. Bloomberg has made a \$1-million contribution to the L.A. races, and Rhee’s organization has put in \$250,000, which she said could advance school reform statewide.

But these outsiders are also joined by a fair number of Los Angeles “insiders”— locals-with-money—who are lining up behind school board candidates who support Superintendent John Deasy. Deasy has made it clear that he believes that many teachers, along with their union, are serious obstacles to better education and that he needs the tools to fire and transfer teachers and proceed with reforms. The tools include tough teacher evaluations, school transformations, charters, “choice,” and more. On the other hand, many teachers and community members believe that Deasy pays too little attention to schools’ lack of and distribution of resources and that he tolerates incompetent and arbitrary district-level management. Many believe that Deasy’s first option for improving low-performing schools is to close them and blame the teachers.

The teachers’ union has shown in recent elections that it is not without resources to mount a campaign. It can raise money from its members that allows it to sponsor some TV ads and send mailers. But perhaps more important, the union has numbers. It exerts the greatest strength when its members are knocking on doors.

And what of Los Angeles parents and residents? How are they shaping the school board election? How do they enact power?

Maybe the most salient figures regarding both the last and forthcoming school board elections are the voter turnouts. The turnout for the last (2011) school board election was 7.41 percent. In other words, 92.59 percent of eligible voters declined a role in determining who would decide on the district’s programs and curriculum, leadership, labor relations, and more. More than \$2 million has been raised already for current candidates competing for the very few votes that will be cast in three of the seven available seats in the next board election.

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Page 2

It's hard to pin down exactly why LA (non)voters show so little interest in school board elections. Perhaps they believe that their vote just doesn't matter. In the last few decades fewer of the fundamental decisions that affect students' experiences have been made at the local school district level. School funding, curricula, and standardized tests are increasingly decided from afar by the state or the federal government. Nonstop funding crises have overshadowed the occasional positive news. Or possibly the public has become wary of the logic and data behind many "magic bullet" schemes that dominate education "reforms" locally and nationwide; for example, charters, school reconstituting, standardized testing, union-busting, and so on.

Whatever the cause for voter disaffection, voter turnout matters. If high voter turnout signals public interest in and commitment to local schools, low voter turnout speaks to a crisis of legitimacy. Low turnout means that there may be very little relationship between what elected representatives hope to do and what most of their constituents want them to do. It means that organized money—whether it comes from outside or inside the district—will have undue influence on the democratic process. The problem here is not simply that we diminish democracy when we privilege fundraising over voting. Campaigns characterized by huge donations and tiny turnouts may leave the appearance that those with a financial stake in decisions before the school board have too much sway over the composition of that board.

We can admire and sympathize with elected public officials who must constantly struggle to balance their responsibilities and allegiances to a) the public; b) advocates whose campaign support (ideas, money, energy) is necessary for election; and c) the officials' personal perspectives and values that might in any one case differ from others'. These tensions are inevitable, and in the larger scheme productive—but not if the voters (or some smallish representation of them) are so weak as not to enter into the "balancing act."

So how can potential voters be persuaded to make their way to the polls in greater numbers than before? School board candidates, their supporters, and members of the press need to build a case for why voting in this election matters. They all have a responsibility to talk about not just the issues that divide, but also the shared value of engaging in the democratic process. The next 10 days represent a teachable moment.

The stakes are great for selecting leaders who can work together respectfully; doing the hard, daily grind of making difficult decisions to improve schooling without wrecking the good and powerful work that is already underway and without undermining the legions of school personnel who are doing outstanding work against difficult odds.

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