

THE ADVOCATE

EDUCATION UNDER SIEGE

A message from the SDEA President

SDEA Members—

Unless one has weathered the last few months of vitriol against public sector union members under a rock, it is beyond trite to suggest that the level and intensity of attacks on public workers in general, and teacher unions in particular, is unprecedented.

The situation education unions now face has never been worse. Formerly our allies, federal, state and local Democrats are spearheading legislative efforts to diminish core rights such as seniority and due process. The demonization of teachers is so complete as to now warrant a lefty-Hollywood scapegoating treatment in the form of *Waiting for Superman*. Not only are core contractual protections under attack, the very existence of teacher union contracts themselves are imperiled. "Solid blue" Wisconsin's Governor-elect is taking direct aim at collective bargaining. Meanwhile in our own backyard, recent legislation passed in Sacramento creates a "parent trigger" allowing a

If we are going to protect our classrooms, our profession and our union, it must be all of us who do the work together.

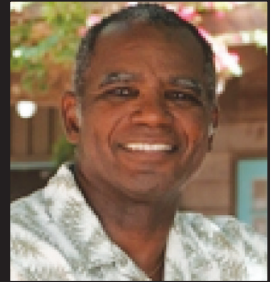
majority of parents to vote to convert a public school to a charter, eradicating the union in an instant. 30 SDUSD schools are eligible for conversion **right now**. Nine other states are considering similar legislation. Even closer still to our own classrooms, a local group of billionaires who have named themselves "San Diegans 4 Great Schools" are gathering signatures to place an initiative on the ballot that would add four *appointed* members to SDUSD's School Board.

It seems difficult to overstate the direness of our situation, and it is crucial that we understand these attacks for what they are — an all-out assault on local control of our public schools, and teacher unions as the greatest obstacle standing in the way of that take-over. These efforts represent an explicit and coordinated design to move decisions about education further away from the influence of educators and community members, and place them in the hands of those who would profit from such a power realignment.

But out of adversity often comes opportunity. The perfect storm in which we now find ourselves is a chance to further build the strength of our own union, and to revitalize public education

Letters in Solidarity

Bill Freeman
SDEA President



in a way that builds community both inside our membership and outside it as well. While the threats we face may seem vast, there are four specific and winnable battles on SDEA's horizon. This special edition of The Advocate overviews the work required this spring regarding: Community Schools Reform, the "San Diegans 4 Great Schools" ballot initiative, the District budget, and the threat of charter conversions. Over the holiday break, SDEA's leadership asked ARs to read an expanded version of the content you will find here, and to ask members at their sites to take ownership of organizing around these threats. At the January 19 Rep. Council, we distributed materials to ARs to start rolling out our spring actions. I ask that you attend the union meetings your AR holds throughout winter and spring to educate members about the work ahead of us, and I ask that you commit to becoming an active SDEA member at your school site and in your community! If we are going to protect our classrooms, our profession and our union, it must be all of us who do the work together. We cannot sit idly by and wait for "Superman" to do it for us!

While these topics may seem daunting, there is no reason not to view these challenges as opportunities. If we commit ourselves to the strategies that we know through our own experiences to be effective, and if we commit ourselves to doing the hard work required to win, SDEA members not only have the opportunity to protect ourselves and our classrooms, but to strike back at the forces aligning against public education at the national level. *While that may sound extreme, if we commit to doing the hard work together, there is no reason it cannot be true. Together we are stronger!*

In Solidarity,

Bill Freeman

Bill Freeman
SDEA President

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SD4GS initiative requires parent outreach

SDEA has written a great deal about the self-anointed “San Diegans 4 Great Schools” in recent months. With the backing of a group of wealthy business leaders and academic elite, SD4GS is using paid signature-gatherers to place their initiative on the next ballot. Voters should be clear—the SD4GS initiative does nothing to support teaching and learning in San Diego’s classrooms. It is simply a thinly-veiled power-grab to diminish the voices of parents, educators and voters in our schools.

For all that their name includes “great schools,” what the SD4GS takes direct aim at the elected governance structure of SDUSD, and includes nothing that would directly support schools or students. SD4GS wants to replace democratic, local control of our schools by adding four appointed members to the five elected School Board members. Since 2008, San Diegans have consistently elected School Board candidates who were backed by San

Diego’s teachers. It appears that SD4GS hopes to circumvent the democratic process to achieve what they have failed to accomplish through engagement in the electoral process.

A quick trip to SD4GS’ own website sheds light on their agenda: <http://www.sd4greatschools.org/>.

The fact is that we simply cannot outspend SD4GS. This billionaire group has a war-chest unmatched by even the most ambitious PAC campaign. But we have two things they don’t—we have the truth, and we have the numbers. If we are going to see this anti-democratic initiative defeated, all 8,000 SDEA members are going to have to hit the pavement and reach out to the other group of people who will be most adversely impacted by this measure: parents. The connections we build with parents will also be crucial as we struggle with issues of school reform, the District budget and the threat of charter conversions, all addressed below.

Community Schools Reform a golden opportunity

At its core, Community Schools Reform constitutes an opportunity to create a grassroots, alternative model of school reform—one that gives teachers a real voice at work and parents a real voice in students’ education—that can be held as a beacon against the top-down, centralized, test-driven “blueprints” hailed by those who would see public schools as we know them decimated. SDEA is in the process of conducting “envisioning sessions” at schools where members have expressed interest in pioneering this project, with the goal of identifying roughly five “model” schools to pilot the program. Each school’s reform plan will emerge through conversations with teachers, parents members of that school’s unique community. Throughout this process, our contract and core union rights such as due process, evaluation and salary structures are off the table. Teachers’ working environment and

our students’ learning environment are one and the same; in protecting one, we protect the other.

That is the nature of the opportunity we face: By forging alliances with the other members of our school communities with whom we share common interests, teacher unions have the opportunity to shift from a strategy of defense and concessionary bargaining to actively striking at the core of the anti-union, anti-democratic forces seeking to wrest control of our schools away from parents and teachers and place it in the hands of a small group accountable to none but themselves. By working to build positive relationships with all of the people who care about schools, SDEA members will take part in building a real community committed to protecting the rights of students and those who teach them, and to create a model for grassroots, effective, locally driven reform that can be emulated.

Tough budget decisions require Board accountability

No one is more aware of the devastating effects of the economic downturn on California’s families than teachers. But despite this grim budgetary reality, SDEA members have succeeded in protecting our students and classrooms over the past three years by remaining united and focused on the real decision-makers around our District’s future: the SDUSD School Board. While the current School Board’s leadership has diminished the level of budgetary ineptitude, we cannot discount the District’s historical pattern of grossly inflating their fiscal problems and making bad decisions accordingly.

The response from SDUSD to California’s economic crisis was **wrong in 2008** (when SDUSD pushed for over 900 unnecessary layoffs), **wrong**

in 2009 (with an erratic budget that fluctuated by over \$115 million within days of its passage), and **wrong again in 2010** (when the District again issued hundreds of layoff notices only to the rescind every one — and hire hundreds more teachers!). It’s shaping up to be the same old story in 2011, with continued threats to our already gutted programs, already scant support staff, and already high class sizes. These proposed cuts are as unnecessary now as they have been every time. Our only certainty is that the District is wrong again. If we are to continue to protect our schools, our profession and our right to make decisions about our own work places, we must continue to demand that our District make cuts away from the classroom and our children.

New law allows parents to ‘charterize’ a District school

Charter schools are public schools. An educator accustomed to the structure of a school district might think of a charter as a tiny district, run by a self-appointed (not elected) governing board who serve as the employers of all staff, with complete autonomy over budget, employment, curriculum, etc. All but two of San Diego’s 41 charter schools are non-union, where the SDEA contract and major Education Code protections do not apply. Only when educators take the collective action of forming a union can they negotiate to achieve the rights and District employees enjoy. Currently in SDUSD, Tubman Village Charter (an SDEA affiliate) and Darnall Charter (a direct CTA affiliate) have made the decision to unionize.

The initial waves of San Diego charter schools were closely linked to the communities in which they were established, and as such could have heralded the mantle of real, meaningful local control

of public schools. But cynically masked in a veneer of parent and teacher control, familiar big-business interests such as the Gates Foundation are effectively pushing their own brand of reform into the public education system using charter schools as easily accessible entry points—such as merit pay, test-based teacher evaluations, and privatized educational services. In short, the promise of charter schools—autonomy, academic freedom, parent engagement, and teacher-led reform—is giving way to a new model based on market-style reforms and diminished worker rights. And now their attention is turning toward converting district schools and even entire districts into charters.

Until quite recently, converting any school to a charter required a vote of over 50% of the permanent status teaching staff. But recent legislation has created a “parent trigger” enabling a majority of parents at qualifying low-performing

schools to decide to convert a school to a charter—with no required vote or input of the teaching staff. **Thirty SDUSD schools meet the criteria for the “parent trigger” now, and could be converted by parents into a charter school next fall**, eradicating the union at that school in an instant.

It is important we realize that charter schools are staffed by educators just like us who have chosen educating children as their career and who deserve a voice in their workplace. SDEA’s work to organize charter educators will both help educators and parents reclaim the charter movement as a real agent of locally driven reform, and remove charter conversions as an attractive option to those who want to get around dealing with an empowered unionized workforce. But we must also continue to defend our existing union rights from those who would see them stripped away as we move forward in this new legislative landscape.

Spring Election Announcement Each year, SDEA members have the opportunity to select representatives from among their colleagues to serve in a variety of elected positions. The spring election will be held March 7-21, and will be conducted via paper ballots which will be mailed to members’ home and/or site. Materials for the election are available for download at www.sdea.net/about/sdea-elections.



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