

THE ADVOCATE

It's time to change the conversation about school reform

Much of last month's Advocate was devoted to a discussion of the recent onslaught of attacks on public education. From the movie *Waiting for Superman* to the emergence of local anti-union and anti-public education groups like the so-called San Diegans 4 Great Schools (see page 3), teachers and their unions have become the scapegoats for all that is ostensibly wrong with education.

Author and education activist Diane Ravitch recently succinctly summarized the state of education reform in our country: "The fundamentals of good education are to be found in the classroom, the home, the community, and the culture, but reformers in our time continue to look for shortcuts and quick answers." The battle that lies ahead for us will determine if proponents of ill-conceived and short-sighted solutions will prevail, or whether the voices of educators, parents, and community members will be heard in our schools.

Make no mistake. SDEA members will not sit on our hands while a few well-financed business interests try to take over our schools. In the past few months, SDEA leadership has participated in discussions with the District and with community organizations like Equality

Alliance and San Diego Organizing Project to talk about a different type of school reform. What is beginning to take shape from these discussions is a possible joint project based upon the understanding that real reform must start in the very communities where we teach and our school children live.

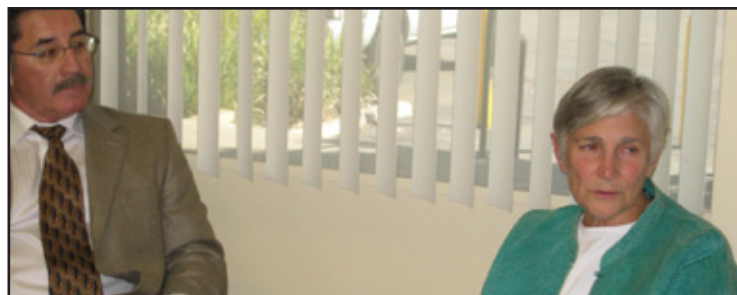
SDEA is your union and will not take part in any type of reform unless it is explicitly member-driven reform. To that end, SDEA leadership and staff will begin a series of "envisioning sessions" at local schools around the city beginning later this month. These sessions will be an opportunity for us to come together and collectively begin the work of determining exactly what is necessary for our schools to continue to succeed.

Your Association Representative will be returning from November's Representative Council with information about scheduling a Community Schools Reform Envisioning Session at your school site. Don't miss this opportunity to join with your colleagues to talk as educators about what our schools need and what type of reform actually works for kids and schools.

Author Diane Ravitch paints a portrait of teacher-driven reform

Diane Ravitch, author of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, addressed SDEA and community members at Madison High School on Wednesday, Nov. 3 regarding the need for a grassroots reform model to challenge the flawed, test-driven approach championed by so many politicians. Ravitch is familiar with our District's inauspicious reform history, devoting a chapter of her book to analyzing the failed top-down reform of Alan Bersin.

Ravitch was joined by SDEA President Bill Freeman, SDUSD Board President Richard Barrera, CTA President David Sanchez, as well as community organization allies Andrea Guerrero of the Equality Alliance and Kevin Malone of the faith-based San Diego Organizing Project. All speakers articulated a shared commitment to working together toward a bottom-up plan that makes sense for *all* stakeholders, and most importantly, our students. Ravitch's address heralds an opportunity for SDEA members to participate in reform efforts that will not only continue to offer our students a world-class public education, but challenge the national reform narrative asserting that success in school means filling in the right bubble, and that bad teachers and our unions are the barriers to our children's futures. Now it's our turn to talk to each other about what we want for our schools and our students, and move forward committed and united.



Top: SDEA members await education historian Diane Ravitch. **Bottom:** CTA President David Sanchez and Ravitch discuss grassroots reform with SDEA leadership.



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'Accountability' talk disregards reality

You have probably heard and read much about teacher accountability. It should be no surprise that these conversations tend to include evaluating teachers based on a preponderance of student test scores. We all understand that teachers should be held accountable for their work, just as all other employees should be held accountable for the work they do. Let's make it clear, student achievement is our ultimate responsibility. That being said, it is not appropriate for teachers, or students, to be labeled based on students' performance on the state standardized test.

Evaluation expectations for educators must be realistic. We don't expect doctors to cure everyone that walks into their offices over the same amount of time. That would depend on the illness of the patient, and many other variables. By the same token, our students come to school with many variables that affect their learning, including health, home

experiences, parental support (or lack therefore), past school performance, behavior issues, etc.

Much of the business community would like to hold teachers to higher accountability standards than other professions, even their own. Recent opinions have hailed charter schools as the solution for student achievement problems. Charter educators, like SDEA members, work hard to provide a quality education for their students. However, a fair test score comparison would require charter school CEOs to open their doors to all students who show up. We could all have high test scores if we were allowed to pick and choose our students. The reality is that *all* students deserve a quality education, regardless of the issues that they bring to the classroom. Something as important as teacher accountability must take into account both the reality of our working environment and the need to measure the whole student—not only the bubble he or she chooses.

Building political power from the ground up

This year's fall political campaign brings SDEA cause for both reflection and celebration. Though our efforts to pass Proposition J and win local funding for schools fell short, we successfully elected Kevin Beiser, a teacher, to our School Board, and un-elected John deBeck, a long time incumbent who voted for layoffs and proposed severe wage cuts at the bargaining table.

This year we began to extend our reach beyond the traditional phone banks and precinct walks that focus only on short-term support for a proposition or a candidate. Instead, we asked all community members, voters and non-voters, whether they would stand with us to support good schools and appropriate funding.

We did this because every fall an election comes and goes. Money is spent, phone calls are made, and doors are knocked upon. At the end of it all what has changed? Are our schools properly funded? Are the voices of our union or our school communities any stronger? In most cases the answer is no.

These are the questions we asked ourselves this year, and they forced us to think differently about how we approached the fall political campaign. The reality is that a strong political program where SDEA

members are fully engaged and organizing out of our sites takes time to build. So how do we do this?

Site by site, member by member.

The structure of our Representative Council is now heavily focused on helping ARs and CRs build site structures that provide the capacity we need to effectively organize and win real improvements in the work we do. If we have a site team in place and effectively communicate to all members, we can bring people together around the importance of winning local school funding the same way we did around fighting an eight percent wage cut and winning a fair contract. We also do more than that. In focusing on building our union in our workplaces, we can build a movement across our union of educators who have enough real power to hold elected leaders accountable to the promise of public education here in San Diego.

The enemies of public education and strong unions will not stop organizing, so neither can we. SDEA must continue our emphasis on strengthening our union at each and every school so that we can be increasingly effective in protecting our rights and the needs of our students, both in the workplace and at the ballot box.

Encanto Elementary teachers stand up for evaluation rights

The extended evaluation cycle of up to five years that union members finally won this year is under threat at Encanto Elementary, but teachers aren't taking it lying down.

At the outset of the school year, Encanto's principal announced that she wouldn't allow extended evaluation cycles for any employees, even if they met the eligibility criteria. The principal indicated that her decision was influenced by her personal philosophy about how often teachers should be evaluated.

Blanket denials like those of Encanto's principal are a violation of our new extended evaluation cycle rights, so Association Representative (AR) Margaret Hernandez and Council Representative (CR) Lynn Howard flew into action. They organized a union meeting the first week of school that was so well attended that it was standing room only. Many union members said the blanket denial of extended evaluation cycles is a matter of respect. "Encanto teachers have pulled our school out of Program Improvement," says CR Lynn Howard. "Now it's time to reward our hard work by honoring our evaluation rights."

At the union meeting members decided to grieve the violation of the union contract. A delegation of five union members met with the principal in a Step One grievance meeting to insist on a remedy: that she meet with each employee eligible for the extended evaluation cycle individually to consider his or her request and attempt to reach mutual agreement. The principal had the gall to say that she'd meet with each teacher individually, but she'd tell each of them "no!"

Union members took advantage of the momentum and immediately reconvened in a meeting where they decided not only to continue the grievance, but more importantly to escalate their organizing activities. Site Organizers circulated a petition about

Billionaires attack democratic School Board election process

A group comprised of local anti-union business leaders, the self-annointed "San Diegans 4 Great Schools", is organizing to place an initiative on the ballot that would add four *appointed* members to SDUSD's currently *elected* School Board. Headed by Bersinite Scott Himelstein and boasting a roster of the City's most staunchly anti-teacher billionaires, SD4GS has used its well-heeled connections to commission a deeply flawed study designed to arrive at the following conclusion: Our schools are failing, they are failing because of bad teachers, and so teachers need to be stripped of our union protections. The study disregards the fact that our District's scores have actually steadily increased post-Bersin.

SD4GS is now using the results of this methodologically flawed study to push their anti-democratic agenda of restructuring our School Board to make room for unvetted appointees. Given their inability to successfully appeal to the public as candidates, these wealthy interests are now attempting to change the rules of the game to circumvent the voting process entirely. The logic appears to be, why run for office and be accountable to the voting public when you can simply buy an appointed Board seat?

SD4GS members seem to care very little about "great schools" and very much about building their own capacity to bust our union. Educators know that effective reform must come from the bottom up and will take real work—not cynical power-grabbing.



Encanto teachers unite in standing up for their rights.

the issue and organized members to show solidarity by wearing SDEA t-shirts on the day the delegation met with the principal in the Step Two grievance meeting.

It was clear that the organizing activities had the principal unsettled, because instead of facing the delegation of five union members alone, she brought an Assistant Area Superintendent to the Step Two grievance meeting as back-up. The principal said that while she respects teachers, she won't allow extended evaluation cycles. Her claims of respect ring hollow for Encanto's teachers—they're not backing down and are continuing the fight for fairness and respect. "We can't be complacent when our work rights are denied," says first-year AR Margaret Hernandez. "When we allow that to happen, we are setting ourselves up to continue to have more and more taken away. As a co-worker said, 'We have to stop a problem when it *shows* up, not when it *blows* up.' Having our rights denied to us at Encanto is a very real problem—not just for us, but for all SDEA members."

If your site has experienced a similar blanket denial of extended evaluation cycles, the Encanto team needs to know about it. Please contact Margaret Hernandez at mfteachesu@cox.net.

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