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The Fresno VOTER

Charter schools panel stresses need for accountability in complex tasks

by Murray Farber

When three panelists and the audience convened at a Lunch and Learn on November 19, they agreed on one thing about education: charter schools have not yet proved to be the solution to declining math and reading scores. They also agreed on the importance of accountability in the operation of the charter schools

Charter Schools was selected as a priority topic at our Program Planning Meeting for this year. November's Lunch & Learn provided access to much of the information our members were seeking.

The panel was comprised of Dr. Michelle Cantwell-Copher, administrator who oversees charter schools for Fresno County's Office of Education; Jeff Sands, senior manager of school development for the California Charter Schools Association; and Debra Odom, coordinator for school choice and responsible for recommending the renewal of charters for the Fresno Unified School District.

There are now 924 charter schools for 350,000 students in the state including 29 in Fresno County. Trends show even more will open. In just the past year, 115 were added as California eased its cap on the number in response to President Obama's Race to the Top initiative to improve education. Previously about 80 charters started each year in our state.

In particular, there were contrary views concerning the achievement of charter schools. A study by the national Credo survey reported that charter schools are improving the scores of low-achieving students faster than traditional schools. But it also found that there are lower overall scores although it speculated that may be due to type of students enrolling, rather than the result of the level of teaching. There were also questions about whether the survey technique was flawed. Sands challenged a

Calendar

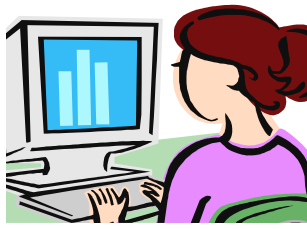
Holiday Party
Members & Guests Invited
Sunday, December 12
2-4 p.m. See page 6

Regular Board Meeting
Tuesday, December 14
4 p.m. League Office

January
Program Planning Meeting
Date to be announced

SAVE THE DATE
SATURDAY
APRIL 2, 2011
LWVF 70th Anniversary
Flyer Inside

President's Message



Latino children account for more than half of all kids under age 5 in California. Our state's future depends on ensuring young Latino children have opportunity to access early education. A statewide telephone survey conducted in July among almost 900 registered Latino voters in California showed 83% of respondents thought it was highly important for their children to attend preschool before kindergarten, and 86% thought it would give their children an advantage in school after attending preschool.

These were some of the polling results presented at a breakfast meeting on November 19 sponsored by LWVF in conjunction with Preschool California, the Fresno County Office of Education, the First Five Commission and other interested groups.

The poll was undertaken jointly by two professional research groups, one that works for the Democratic Party and the other that works for the Republican Party, to assure non-partisan results. While 87% of Democrats and 87% of Independents support greater investment in preschool, even in the current budget environment, 68% of Republicans do so as well. This was an encouraging sign to preschool advocates. What is more, 94% of Democrats, 93% of Independents and 76% of Republicans agree that high quality preschool is important to prepare children for success in kindergarten and beyond, even though California's economy and budget are in bad shape.

The LWVF was asked to be a co-sponsor of this event because of our leadership in mobilizing Fresno County to work for greater access for preschool for all children. I was honored to be asked to moderate the discussion after the poll results were presented. A school board member from Coalinga expressed concern that the needs of Latino families and children might not be met in implementing greater access to preschool. Fresno County Superintendent Larry Powell assured him that the necessary supports for all children, including those with needs such as assistance with English or special education, are spelled out in the Master Plan for Voluntary Preschool that was published last year by the FCOE with input from League members, educators, parents and many interested community groups.

Francine

Member News

Changes/Corrections
(please adjust your roster)

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Education

by Kay Bertken



The big news locally is that Measure Q, Fresno Unified School District's \$280 million dollar facilities bond measure, was passed by voters on November 2. It was among the State's highest valued bond measures in the November election, and it passed by one of the highest margins—75% yes votes. The League was active in its support of the measure—congratulations to us all! The District will now begin prioritizing and formalizing specific projects so that building can begin.

The League continues to participate with the United Way's Successful Children's Impact Council in its efforts to bring community groups together in support of education. The Council has adopted three major goals: 1) increase the graduation rate 2) increase the number of children reading at grade level by the third grade and 3) engage Fresno County youth in

“real world learning” through greater involvement in community activities.

With respect to the third goal, the Youth Service Council of the Center for Multicultural Cooperation is partnering with Hands On Fresno to engage more youth in community service through its Second Annual Service Fair to be held on January 17. Last year more than 400 Fresno youth signed up to participate in various service projects.

A proposal before the council this month involved establishing a group to advocate on behalf of youth participation in community decision-making, particularly in decisions involving school policies and curriculum.

This month the Fresno Unified School Board meetings included the annual update on its English Learner student population. **There are 18,500 students in Fresno Unified classified as English Learners.** Goals for

these students include moving them out of specific English Language Development (ELD) classes and into regular classrooms so that they will not be missing out on subject matter curriculum. FUSD has made a commitment to training elementary teachers and secondary English, math, history and science teachers in specific strategies that support these English learners, and other students as well, through specifically structured lesson approaches.

Hundreds of district teachers have received the training thus far.

While English Learners still lag behind their native English speaking peers, the learning gap has narrowed from 5.1% in 2007 to 2.3% lower rates of proficiency on the California Standards Mathematics Test. On the CST English Language Arts Test, while there has been improvement overall for all groups and the learning gap has declined from a 13.1% lower rate for EL students in 2007 to a 9.1% differential in 2010, the gap is still substantial.

Natural Resources

by Mary Savala

I attended the City Council meeting on October 27 to speak in favor of the amendment to the General Plan which defined sidewalks as meaning both public and private, and specified several reasonable exceptions to the requirement for sidewalks on both sides of the street.

The council asked the City Attorney to come up with a resolution which would let it interpret the policy to mean private streets were excepted from the require-



ment. The discussion of the item centered around the detriment to builders should private streets be included in the policy after 8 years of inconsistent application of the policy for private, gated communities. There was also concern expressed by three council members about the “interpreting” process creating a liability for the city. There was no discussion of public health and safety.

The item was continued to November 4 and then to November 18. A continuance was granted to December 2 at my request since neither I nor our attorney can be at the November 18 meeting. The City Attorney has distributed a memo to the Council that says the sidewalk policy cannot be changed without an environmental impact review.

Voter Services

by Liz Shields



NOVEMBER ELECTION

Grateful thanks go to fifty-six League members who helped with the absentee ballot processing and answered phones for the Elections Department. This year we had observers from Citizens Against Voter Fraud sitting in on the ballot unfolding until after Election Day, when they transferred their attentions to the ballot review process in the adjoining room. After the election we had additional observers from the grand jury, from representatives of both parties in the Costa-Vidak race, and from the Orange Cove candidates' representatives.

We worked 313.5 hours on the ballots, 72.75 hours on the phones on Election Day and 34 hours on the phones on Election eve. This excellent volunteer-

ism from our members will add over \$3500 to our income.

As in previous elections the majority of phone calls to the phone bank before and during Election Day were about polling locations; the 50% reduction in polling places may have added to the numbers. Questions about absentee ballots were the second most common type of call. These included voters who had not recognized the ballot envelope and discarded it, those who had moved recently without changing their address and those who thought they were permanent absentee voters but had only changed their status for one election. It appears that better voter education about the voting process and better publicity about changes in upcoming elections are needed.

VOTER REGISTRATION

I finished the High School Voter Registration project at Sunnyside and Kerman. The responses from both students and teachers were poor compared to Spring semester's registration drive. Part of the reason for the poor response at Sunnyside may be due to the "birthday gift" of a voter registration form that social science teachers give to students on their 18th birthdays. We need to follow up to see how many actually fill out and submit the forms, and provide some incentive for students to complete the process if necessary.

Maggie Duncan, the project coordinator at LWVUS, said that other League chapters nationwide were getting the same poor registration numbers in the Fall.

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Charter Schools

(continued from page 1)

Odom stressed, "Charters are not the answer; quality schools are the answer. We do not want experiment factories. There is research all over the place. You can get more reports than you want."



Debra Odom

Fresno Unified District oversees 10 charter schools. "We do not dictate what happens in charter schools," she said. "We are there with expertise to assist if there is a problem." The charters face the dual responsibility of delivering high level education while coping with the same problems that challenge a business.

Odom explained that when individuals or groups start a charter, they have their own boards – not Fresno Unified's --to operate the school. However, Fresno Unified is authorized to provide oversight but not actually run the school.

In her presentation, Copher explained that the State Legislature in 1992 instructed school boards to approve new charters. However, the legislature simultaneously wanted charter developers "put through the wringer." Copher said that charters were freed from many regulations "in exchange for contracting for performance-based accountability." As a result, charters can be closed if they fail to meet the terms of their contract. To insure that they deliver up to contract and meet legal compliance, a team visits each charter school once a year with a 20-page checklist.

The panelists also noted that large numbers of proposed charters never open because district boards find flaws in their proposals. Copher said the school founders "may be passionate about children but the regulations are complex." The denial is often based on lack of financial resources, inappropriate locations, inability to establish a

multi-year budget, or the lack of checks and balances for a strong academic program. Foundations are supporting charters seeking innovations that could become models for other schools as part of their dissatisfaction with traditional schools and student performance.



Student Unit

by Diane Blair

Students once again participated in the Take Back the Night event at Fresno State. Take Back the Night is



an annual event that occurs across campuses nationwide to raise awareness about gendered violence. The student unit distributed voter educational cards and Easy Voter guides for the election, as well as information about the League.

On October 27 the Student Unit sponsored a student debate on Proposition 19 which would have allowed people age 21 and older to grow and have small quantities of marijuana for personal use. The event featured a debate between informed students from participating argumentation courses. The event was well attended by approximately 40 students and faculty from across the campus.

The Student Unit also had a letter to the editor published in the *Fresno Bee* regarding the exclusion of Fresno State students from the gubernatorial debate held on campus on October 2. This letter was responded to by the President of Associated Students on campus, Pedro Ramirez, in which he claimed more than 100 students were able to attend the debate. This figure was misleading because it did not reflect only the number of CSUF students who were ticket holders but included student volunteers and workers for the event as well as students from other campuses. Our own student unit president was told the only way she could attend the debate was if she agreed to volunteer at the event.

Locally, County Superintendent Larry Powell and the Fresno Regional Foundation are strong supporters of charter schools, Copher said. Sands commented that the Central Valley has displayed "a spirit of cooperation" as the teachers association, boards and administrators demonstrated a willingness to collaborate. He contrasted the region's positive approach to charters with the conflict in the Los Angeles area.

Sands said the charter association favors quantity as well as quality. "We need a critical mass of charters cooperating with county districts." Yet he said charters are not intended to replace traditional schools.



Jeff Sands

The discussion prompted a flurry of questions from the audience including a sharp difference over the caliber of teacher preparation and quality. Odom responded, "Teaching is a craft that must be developed. It requires three to five years of work and lots of handholding."

Sands denied that elitism sparked the development of charter schools. In response to a claim that teaching would improve if parents were more deeply involved, Janet Ryan, a member of both LWVF and the Fresno Unified school board, offered a strong comment. "Parents send us what they have and we have to teach all of them. We have classrooms with kids in poverty competing positively with kids from affluent families."

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