

4th District PTA Roundtable - November 6, 2009
CUSD Education Center – Board Room

Legislative Q&A with Assemblywoman Diane Harkey and Rick Simpson

Assemblywoman Diane Harkey (R – 73rd District)
Rick Simpson, Deputy Chief of Staff to Speaker Karen Bass (D)

Report by: Julia Walsh

Diane Harkey and Rick Simpson met with 4th District PTA members and CUCPTSA Leg Chairs to discuss education issues, including Race to the Top funding, government reform, the state budget, and other upcoming issues. They also spoke to Government classes at several area high schools during their visit.

Race to the Top

Rick Simpson: Right now he is not sure if we are racing to the top or sauntering to the brink.

Under the Race to the Top rules, no state can have a firewall between the use of student assessment outcomes and teacher evaluations. Although California did not actually have a firewall, there was a perception that a provision in state law prohibiting the use of the state database for teacher data (CALTIDES) meant that districts could not link the data locally. The problem was fixed by SB 19 (Simitian).

There are also several new bills pending that go beyond SB 19 to allow extra “style points” that may help with California’s Race to the Top grant application. The California Assembly is holding hearings this fall to address these issues. This is a very political area. The governor wants to get all of the federal funds available under Race to the Top. However, all of this new funding will come with new costs and new programs. Since the RTTT funds are one-time funds, we should look at whether it is worthwhile to get the money if it comes with extra mandated costs, keeping in mind that the money cannot be used to backfill cuts.

Diane Harkey: The federal stimulus money comes with programs and new costs. Should we take the money? No, because whenever we take federal money, there are strings attached.

Governance Reform

Diane Harkey: Every time we try to reform government, it seems like we end up deeper in the hole. We try to take the politics out of politics, and it doesn’t work. Right now, the legislature has been cut off from decision-making, and we have ballot-box budgeting where billions of dollars of bonds get passed by voters.

Regarding the Commission on the 21st Century Economy, the results weren’t bad, but there is no cushion for the business community to absorb additional taxes. It is not

clear at this point whether the Commission's proposal is revenue neutral (i.e. does not have a net increase in taxes).

Regarding the Constitutional Convention proposed by the Bay Area Council, anything that comes out of Northern California will not benefit us in Southern California. The meetings will be held in Northern California, so even though we have a majority of the population here in the southern part of the state, we won't have the same ability to participate. We are seeing lots of division based on Northern Cal. vs. Southern Cal, and keep in mind that anything south of Sacramento is considered Southern California to those up north.

Government is not broken, but we do need to right the ship.

California Forward has limited impact. The problem is that they are looking to reform the electoral process, but she gives California voters more credit for being smart. She thinks that if the legislature is not doing a good job, then the voters will turn them over.

Right now, there are 51 Democrats and 29 Republicans in the Assembly. There is no balance, and no bipartisan effort. Only tax increases require a 2/3 vote, so anything else that the majority party wants can go through. They don't even have bipartisan bickering at this point. The Senate Democrats and Senate Democrats don't even agree. In the Assembly, since everyone has to run for reelection every two years, the Assembly Democrats were not willing to do the things that might have made it through the Senate, like approve early release of prisoners as part of the budget deal. Having two year terms forces the Assembly members to stay close to their constituents.

Rick Simpson: How can anyone be against reform? Reform implies making things better. His idea of reform is to eliminate term limits, etc., but the Republican idea of reform would have a very different view, and might include a spending cap, or a 2/3 vote to raise fees. We need to remember that motion does not always equal progress. So what does education reform mean? Does it mean lowering class sizes or making it easier to fire teachers?

Regarding the Constitutional Convention, asking random citizens to rewrite the state's Constitution scares both Democrats and Republicans.

California Forward is proposing fixes, and is politically astute enough to know that if some big interest is against it, it will be killed. They are proposing a "grand compromise" and have been working with all interest groups, and have crafted a reform legislative proposal that they are bringing to the legislature.

The Legislature's Joint Committee on Reform was suggested by the Assembly Democrats and Republicans.

On other reforms issues, districts in California are too large. It is difficult for legislators to take the pulse of the people when they have 500,000 or 1,000,000 people in their districts.

We do need some kind of reform. We are in a “negative feedback loop” where the more the state has its hands tied, the harder it is to get good results, and then voters pass more constraints on the legislature as a result.

Top Issues in California

Diane Harkey: We can expect a constant financial fiasco at the state level for the next three years. In contrast, the counties and cities have done fairly well. Orange County and San Diego County are both in good standing. But unemployment is still rising. We can expect unemployment in Orange County to start to drop next year, possibly to about 8%. The budget will continue to shrink, because of decreased revenues, so we need to focus on increasing the size of the pie.

Our state budget went from \$104 billion to \$84 billion, and education was hit because it is more than 40% of the budget. Right now, the bulk of our taxes are paid by a very small number of people, around 5%, but tax decisions are being driven by people who don't have a vested interest and don't even pay taxes themselves. This is dangerous!

Biotech is a new area where we can try to support growth in our state. UCI is creating new technologies that have the potential to create jobs, and the same thing is happening in San Diego. Everyone likes biotech because it is clean technology and also generates high income jobs.

There is potential for growth and expansion of industry in California, but budget constraints create big issues. We are projecting a \$20 billion deficit based on 1st quarter revenues. We need to reduce heavy regulations.

Rick Simpson: There are a lot of issues, but it can be hard to get people to pay attention until we get our house in order. We have several million people in California who don't have health insurance. We have difficult water issues, but it is important to note that everyone came together to solve them this year. For public education, we should recognize that California has been successful because of our investment in human capital. But we are systematically dismantling what we have done.

Our funding for public education is 20% below our 2006-2007 budget numbers. When the “Getting Down to Facts” study on education reform was released at that time, they recommended a 40% increase in spending on education. But none of this is possible until we get our fiscal house in order.

Q & A:

1. How do we deal with budgets cuts that are so severe, and still get our kids ready for life?

Diane Harkey: We need local funding and local control, which would work better than our current system. Orange County schools are also underfunded, but this is difficult to fix because you would have to talk the higher funded districts into giving up money.

Rick Simpson: Our current situation is a horrible train wreck. We can restore education cuts tomorrow, but we would have to make ugly cuts elsewhere. He agrees that local funding and local control is the long-term answer.

2. Since we have tied the legislature's hands, how do we fix it?

Diane Harkey: It is a hot potato to tell people that they don't have the right to vote on initiatives. However, this used to be a grassroots process, and we would get one or two initiatives to vote on. Now we have lots of initiatives on the same ballot. We need to increase voter awareness so voters will vote no.

Rick Simpson: The initiative process is broken. We have more initiatives, and it is easier to qualify an initiative, than in any other state. But it will take time to fix it. Most of the constraints are constitutional, so we need constitutional amendments. We need to set aside the partisan divide, and restore voter confidence. When that happens, voters will be willing to release some of this power.

3. Won't the constitutional convention be the quickest fix?

Rick Simpson: The legislative counsel believes that they cannot legally limit the scope of what the constitutional convention deals with. Rick believes that California Forward's proposals may be a better solution. The balance of interests is the better way to go.

Diane Harkey: She doesn't want the legislature to abdicate this responsibility. She believes that it is possible to manage the money better.

4. Why does California have the highest standards but the latest entrance date for kindergarten?

Rick Simpson: He has worked on this issue since 1985, trying to change the kindergarten entry age. The School Readiness Task Force suggested that rather than changing age to fit the curriculum, we should be changing the curriculum to fit the developmental age. There is also a proposal to see students progress not by age, but by their mastery of the curriculum. There is another proposal to phase in a later kindergarten entry date by one month each year for three years. Some people believe that the lower enrollment in kindergarten for these three years would free up budget money to pay for day care.

5. Can we make the state budget more realistic, so that it is like county and school budgets where they have to prove that their budgets balance over time?

Basically, by the time the legislature gets called back to resolve a budget deficit, the figures are out of date. The legislature knows the numbers are out of date, and that they aren't cutting enough, but if they acknowledge what they really think the revenues will be in the future, they will just have to cut more, faster.