

Charter advocates take over Los Angeles school board

Dan Conway
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In what was the most expensive school board election in US history, two school board seats in the Los Angeles Unified School District are projected to be won by the favored candidates of the billionaire-backed charter school movement. More than \$14 million was spent on the election.

It is expected that two candidates who are backed by the teachers union—outgoing board president Steve Zimmer and Imelda Padilla—will be defeated by Nick Melvoin and Kelly Gonez. Melvoin received 57 percent of the vote to Zimmer’s 43 percent while Gonez is heavily favored to win her seat once ballots are fully counted.

Melvoin’s campaign alone received \$5.69 million from charter school advocates while Zimmer received nearly \$2.5 million from the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), National Education Association, American Federation of Teachers, California Teachers Association and the American Federation of Teachers.

Gonez received \$3.3 million in outside contributions for her campaign while the union-backed Padilla received approximately \$2.34 million.

Reed Hastings, Netflix CEO and former member of the California State Board of Education, donated \$7 million to the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) since last September according to the *Los Angeles Times*. That group spent nearly \$3 million to support Melvoin and Gonez.

Other groups donating to the pro-charter candidates included the so-called Parent Teacher Alliance. Some voters expressed confusion with the better-known Parent Teacher Association as callers from the alliance announced that they were calling on behalf of the “PTA.”

Another funding source was from a group called “LA Students 4 Change.” The group was led by CCSA political consultant John Shallman who revealed to the *Times* that the high school students appearing in flyers and campaigning on behalf of the group each received as much as \$500 for their help.

The Parent Teacher Alliance itself donated more than \$5.1 million to the pro-charter candidates. They also received more than \$4.53 million transferred to them from the CCSA during the last four months of 2016.

While it is not possible to track the ultimate sources of

campaign funding for each group, it seems highly likely at this point, based on spending by the CCSA and PTA, that the lion’s share of funding for the pro-charter candidates came from one individual, Hastings, who may have just effectively bought the Los Angeles school board election.

This demonstrates how America’s oligarchy shapes policy. Hastings, with a net worth of over \$1.6 billion, has been an extremely vocal charter school advocate on the West Coast. Giving the keynote address at the California Charter School Association of March 14, 2014, Hastings argued for the elimination of elected school boards entirely. “The fundamental problem with school districts is not their fault. The fundamental problem is that they don’t get to control their boards and the importance of the charter school movement is to evolve America from a system where governance is constantly changing and you can’t do long term planning to a system of large non-profits,” he said.

In his concession speech last week, outgoing board president Zimmer noted a tectonic shift was now underway on the school board. Zimmer noted that the election will “dramatically affect how the board deals with charter schools. It will dramatically affect how the board deals with the budget. And charter school expansion is something we can all anticipate now. I would be shocked if there wasn’t a major effort by the California Charter School Association to expand and accelerate charters.”

Melvoin—whose campaign was led by Bill Burton, a former deputy White House press secretary in the Obama administration—spelled out the new board’s attitude towards privatization in an interview given immediately after his election victory.

“The district as a district to me is like an abstract concept. These are schools that have children in them and teachers in them and they are all part of the LA ecosystem, so to protect the district at the expense of a parent’s right to choose or a kid’s right to a good education has never made sense to me,” he said. In other words, the school district must treat all schools, public, private and even religious equally because they all have “children in them” and “teachers in them” and therefore continue to divert money from public schools to various for-profit and religious schools.

Melvoin has also promised teacher pension “reform” as a

major initiative of the new school board as well as ending the so-called “charter killer” bill supported by outgoing president Zimmer, which disallows charter schools to appeal to the state or federal government if their application is denied by the district. Melvoin also hopes to accelerate the charter co-location process whereby unused space at traditional public schools is handed over to charters for their use. This has caused significant controversy as it has been revealed that charters are taking over spaces reserved for non-regular public school activities such as music rehearsal rooms.

Melvoin and Gonez now join board members Ref Rodriguez and Monica Garcia, giving the “pro charter” board members a 4 to 3 majority. As the board has the authority to hire and fire the district superintendent, it is also widely expected that current superintendent Michelle King will be replaced by an even more pliant tool of charter school interests.

UTLA president Alex Caputo Pearl, for his part, bemoaned the union’s loss of influence on the school board. “We’re in the midst of an existential fight for the soul of public education, and last night we lost an important round,” he said.

That defeat of the UTLA-backed candidates underscores the fact that the union has largely been discredited after decades of collaborating with the Democratic-controlled state and local government in the closing of schools, attacks on teachers’ wages and benefits and diversion of funding to charter schools—some of which are run by the UTLA itself.

In so far as the UTLA is concerned about the “soul of public education” it is only that the union bureaucracy has a seat at the table to gain a share of the spoils from privatization and to maintain a base of dues-paying teachers no matter how miserable their wages and conditions.

The current labor agreement for 33,000 teachers and other support staff expires in June of this year. Contract proposals have thus far revolved around the union’s “Schools LA Students Deserve” campaign, which is aimed at promoting illusions that the union and Democratic Party officials will improve educational conditions. In fact, the campaign has largely abandoned traditional demands for compensation increases, tenure protections and increased school funding in favor of the union’s support for school accountability and parental control, i.e. initiatives favored by pro-charter forces.

The campaign supports the state’s Local Control Funding Formula, begun by the administration of Jerry Brown in 2014. The formula was created precisely as a mechanism to divert public funding to charter schools, which are now the direct recipients of increased funding under the formula.

Although the teachers union is fully on board with the creation of charter schools and while the Los Angeles school district has more charter school students than any other district in the country, the charter school movement has recently suffered a string of high profile setbacks that it hopes to reverse once the new school board begins work.

Five days before the election, the district voted to close two

charter schools operated by an umbrella Education Management Organization known as the Celerity Group. The vote came after officials from the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI raided Celerity’s offices and after the *Los Angeles Times* found that Celerity executives used school funds to pay for lavish funds and hotel stays. Celerity’s chief executive and founder Vielka McFarlane earned an annual salary of \$471,842 in 2013, the *Times* reported.

According to a well-publicized study posted in the *Indiana Law Journal* last February by Education professors Preston Green III, Bruce Baker and Joseph Oluwole at the University of Connecticut, Rutgers University and Montclair State University respectively, the operations of charter schools closely parallel those of the Enron corporation prior to its bankruptcy in December 2001.

The report was entitled “Are Charter Schools the Second Coming of Enron?: An Examination of the Gatekeepers That Protect Against Dangerous Related-Party Transactions in the Charter School Sector.” It found that, similar to Enron’s practices of setting up shell companies to enrich executives and shareholders, “unscrupulous individuals and corporations are using their control over charter schools and their affiliates to obtain unreasonable management fees for their services and funnel money intended for charter schools into other business ventures.”

To cite only one example of this trend, in April 2013 a California jury found Los Angeles-based Ivy Academia founders Yevgeny Selivanov and Tatyana Berkovich guilty of felonies and misdemeanors related to their running of the charter school group. The pair simultaneously ran a private preschool on the same campus as Ivy Academia and used the preschool to sublease space to the charter at a rate nearly three times the fair market value, increasing rent from \$18,370 per month to \$43,870.



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