

Voting is not Enough!

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I attended my first SF school board meeting of the year on January 16th. Because of the November elections, I expected a very different dynamic from that which has characterized the last 12 years of Board/district administration relationships. But instead of seeing the new progressive board majority reassert their leadership over policy, they appeared to be trapped within a paradigm defined by Sacramento. Elections are not enough.

The limitations of Board power was made clear to me during the debate over duelling Prop H proposals. When Prop H passed in 2004, the school board appointed a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) to come up with recommendations for how to spend Prop H funds. In keeping with the top-down style of her predecessors, acting Superintendent Gwen Chan had her staff write their own proposal in addition to instructing the CAC in its research. The CAC recommended that each school site receive \$50,000 block grants for violence prevention programs. The Superintendent opposed this. Instead, she wanted the money to be spent on “academic support” (e.g., math coaches to increase test preparation and computers to track test scores). The brief debate over these different priorities illustrated two very large problems—public schools are grossly under-funded and the decision-making process by which funding priorities are determined is essentially authoritarian.

Someone, of course, pointed out that “academic support” for teachers was pointless if students were not in an emotional or psychological condition to learn. Yet no one seemed to question why it had to be a choice between one or the other. Why isn't there enough money for both academic support (however unsupportive it would actually be) and broadly defined health care? Several progressive board members felt compelled to state that they would support a compromise between the CAC stipulations and those of the district administration. This seemed to indicate the same problem we have with Congress and the War. The voters elected a Democratic Congress on the strength of their anti-war positions but all the new Congress can do is propose non-binding resolutions.

Why is government so unresponsive to the popular will? Part of the answer lies in the structure of the government itself. In terms of school policy, part of the answer lies in the passage of Prop 13 in 1978. This initiative effectively removed educational policy decisions from local districts and placed them in the hands of state legislators while simultaneously ensuring that state education funding would precipitously decline during the next 20 years. Whoever holds the purse strings decides policy. And the further removed the “deciders” are from you, the less influence you have over them. Bill Hauck, President of the California Business Roundtable explained why CBR (the top CEOs in California) moved its headquarters from San Francisco to Sacramento in May 1997: “It is difficult to be part of the public policy-making process with some concentration on implementation and action if you are not [in Sacramento].” In 1999, the state legislature passed legislation that CBR essentially wrote—the Public School Accountability Act, which established state content standards and rewards and sanctions based on the results of a state mandated standardized test.

District Superintendents, trained by corporate foundations, have a mandate to define academic achievement by test scores alone, hence Gwen Chan's choice of “academic support” over student health. The decline in state funding over the last 25 years makes such choices mutually exclusive while the rationale behind testing legitimizes such underfunding—all you need are “high expectations.” Since elected local leaders' hands are often tied, we-the-people must organize and take to the streets if we want fundamental change.