

Notes: “Improving Funding for Public Schools” - Panel Discussion, Sept. 29, ‘09

On September 29 the League of Women Voters sponsored a panel discussion on the topic “Improving Funding for Public Schools”, held at the CCCOE.

Joe Ovick, the County Superintendent of Schools noted that in the last 18 months there has been a **22% reduction in state funding for Contra Costa County schools**. With **49% of California’s budget cuts coming from education**, Contra Costa schools are receiving **\$140 million less to educate the same number of children**. He worries that cuts of this magnitude impair our ability to prepare our students to participate fully in today’s “knowledge-based economy.”

Eric Heins, Region One Director of the California Teacher’s Association, said that the State will start the budget year in January with a **\$7.2 billion deficit**, and that the economy is **not expected to recover until the 2013-2014 budget year**. He described California as being in a “race to the bottom” in funding per student: we were 47th before the last round of budget cuts and likely to drop to 49th or 50th when the new rankings are published.

Craig Cheslog, District Director for Assemblyman Tom Torlakson, stated that the 2007 revenue projection for this year was \$110 billion and that the actual is \$75 billion. The \$60 budget gap was closed by a combination of spending cuts (52%), temporary tax increases (21%), federal stimulus money (13%) and “other”, including some assumptions that may not come to fruition (14%). California is **\$2,400 per student below the national average in education spending**. Although many in California feel that this is a high-tax state, we are actually **17th in the nation in combined state taxes**. Mr. Cheslog described California’s inter-generational compact under which children must receive an adequate education in order to be employable as adults and support the payroll taxes necessary to fund Social Security and Medicare.

Nancy Vandell, Education Advocate for the California PTA, outlined **effective advocacy strategies**. Her advice included **setting goals and priorities** each year, building relationships with **legislators** and their staff, and coordinating **letter-writing campaigns**. **At the local level she recommended supporting parcel tax and bond measure campaigns**, hosting candidate forums (always remembering to adhere to the mandate to stay neutral), holding presentations on advocacy issues, **communicating to parents and community members**, and becoming informed about the issues.