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Town Hall Meeting Educates Citizens on State of Schools

By Cathy Tyson

With an all-star line-up of speakers who really know the dirt on the current state of California education, a good sized audience comprised mostly of parents with school-aged kids got a thorough snapshot of what's going on at a recent Town Hall on Education meeting at Stanley Middle School.

Jean Follmer kicked things off as the moderator with a brief introduction about the goal of the grass roots organization that she co-founded, Lafayette for Education, "We want stable funding for all schools in California," she stated. Dr. Fred Brill, Lafayette School District Superintendent and the first speaker of the evening echoed that theme, "You are the warriors fighting for education (referring to the parents in attendance). There's a growing equity issue that we must confront."

Dr. John Nickerson, Acalanes Union High School District Superintendent spoke about the fiscal crisis, "We are barely making it at AUHSD. He explained that parents step up in a big way: 20% of the budget is paid by an existing parcel tax, and the Parents Club contributes 4%, but calls that formula unsustainable. "The State of California is not adequately funding education," said Nickerson. He asked if public education is a core value in this state. Funding from Sacramento has been cut approximately 18% over the past few years.

Next up on the agenda, Craig Cheslog, Principal Advisor to State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Torlakson speculated about the reasoning behind academic financial challenges, "70% of California voters do not have a child in a public school. These people don't understand the depth of the problem." His solution: "In 2012, education reform equals revenue."

Founder of "Close the Loophole," San Francisco Assessor Recorder Phil Ting proposed an interesting solution. With an intimate knowledge of property taxes, he pointed out tough structural changes that he feels need to be made to solve the problem. Proposition 13 limited the rate of increase of property taxes for both commercial and residential properties. While the cost of real estate since the measure passed in 1978 has gone up, much like long-term homeowners, land owners of commercial properties that have not changed hands or have been passed down to owner's descendants, pay a significantly lower property tax rate than new property owners. He calls for a market value approach, so that all commercial land owners pay their fair share.

Nancy Skinner, Assemblymember representing the 14th district and Mark DeSaulnier, California State Senator from the 7th district, along with Crystal Brown, Co-Founder and President of Educate Our State, rounded out the panel of the Town Hall meeting.

"We were incredibly pleased to see so many individuals from Lafayette and its neighboring cities seeking to learn more about education funding in California. Our attendees clearly recognize both the value and importance of adequate funding for all California public schools," said Follmer. "We plan to begin a speaker series after the first of the year and encourage those who are interested to visit our website, <http://lafayetteforeducation.weebly.com/>, frequently. We also update our Facebook and Twitter accounts daily."

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