

Time for *Another* School Choice Initiative?

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K E V I N T E A S L E Y

SOME CALIFORNIANS want to place a school choice initiative on the March 2000 ballot. Before you go too far down that road, it would be a healthy exercise to review what it takes to win. A well-written measure, good polls, and adequate funding are not enough. In 1993, the last time Californians saw such a ballot measure — Proposition 174 — we *had* a good initiative, polls showing 70 percent support before the campaign started, and a good amount of money to begin the battle. In the end, proponents raised and spent nearly \$5 million — and yet lost 70-30. Exit polls showed two-thirds of those voting *against* the initiative *supported* the concept. What happened?

I've spent much time since that loss trying to answer that question and to use the answers I have found to help win future battles. Immediately after the campaign, I helped start the CEO Foundation of Southern California. It provides scholarships to low-income children in South Central LA who want to attend private schools. We served more than 800 the first year, 1994, with 5,000 on the waiting list. This year, the foundation was merged with the new Children's Scholarship Fund started by Ted Forstmann and John Walton.

Beginning late in 1994 (and continuing today), I helped put together a "kitchen cabinet" of school choice supporters from across the country. The idea was to help supporters decide better how to distribute their "school choice campaign" money by helping them review a campaign's strength in terms of its political, grassroots, business, and financial support as well as its campaign plan — *before* contributions are made. Also, these supporters need to know one another. That effort was largely successful and led to victories in Arizona and Minnesota in 1997. While the kitchen cabinet formula is good, more is needed.

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Last year I founded the Greater Educational Opportunities Foundation, based in Indianapolis, to help build trusting and knowledge-based relationships with inner-city leaders and families — the very people we believe will benefit most from vouchers. The primary lesson of the Proposition 174 defeat, bolstered by my experience since then, is this: in addition to money and a good idea, winning also requires a wide network of people who trust one another and are capable of articulating and delivering our message to those millions who stand to benefit from school choice. This network must work well, communicating quickly and efficiently. But above all, winning requires that we build trust between messenger and audience: relationships must be cultivated with the real world people — especially including inner-city families and leaders — whose interests school choice best serves. How much knowledge do they have about choice? How many hours and how much money will school choice proponents devote to making sure they have a chance to learn the truth about it from sources they trust and to which they will listen? The answers to these questions are at least as important as statewide polls and adequate funding in gauging a voucher's chance of winning.

PROPOSITION 174's defeat is routinely blamed on our being outspent, on a "flawed" initiative, on opposition within suburban communities, on bad campaign strategy, etc., etc. I don't buy any of it, judging from my experience on the campaign and following it. Whatever minor roles such causes may or may not have played, the reason we lost was that we did not do our job right from day one, and that is self-criticism, because I was there from day one. We meant well. Our team was first rate. We had done the research; we knew choice was the right solution to California's educational crisis. It still is. The problem was: *we were the only ones who knew it*. The people we were seeking to help had no clue about choice. We

THE FRONT LINE

Union Grassroots Activism

Duane Dichiara

This February in Miami Beach, the leadership of the AFL-CIO made the decision to fund a program that will change the dynamics of politics throughout the United States: Labor 2000. Allocating approximately \$45 million, the unions have decided to place chapters on permanent campaign footing, attempting to recreate "machines" in most urban areas nationwide. Some states, deemed key to presidential and congressional campaigns decades into the new millennium, have been targeted for additional organization and funds. One of those states is California.

National union leadership examined the grossly expensive, often ineffective media campaigns their consultants mounted in 1996 and 1998 and were dissatisfied. They concluded that, given increasing voter cynicism towards paid media and the built-in source of manpower inherent in their organizations, credible grassroots campaigns could be created at a more reasonable vote-to-dollar ratio. Currently, the unions in question budget approximately \$20

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million for the funding of their political accounts. Taking advantage of local chapters' ability to force their members to support union politics, the executive council of the AFL-CIO passed a measure this winter to request affiliate unions to "donate" to the program, in both 1999 and 2000, \$1 for each of their 13.7 million members. Combining these sources of income, union officials estimate that in the 1999-2000 cycle they can raise between \$40



and \$45 million dollars for Labor 2000.

A virtual textbook for union shop organization, *Organizing to Win* (published by Cornell Press in 1998), clearly details the intensive local affiliate commitment in the early 1990s to return to the grassroots politics of their grandfathers. Rather than follow the "member service" models of the last generation, current union local leaders are moving quickly into an organizing model that "emphasizes the need for member mo-

bilization, collective action, and militancy." These programs make organized labor a powerful negotiator in the workplace and a lethal opponent in grassroots advocacy and "Get-Out-The-Vote."

Unions have substantial historical experience in, and a keen understanding of, the mechanics of urban machine building. They also have resources generally not available to Republicans attempting similar programs. In particular, labor has developed an increasingly effective political communication and organization system geared towards mobilizing large numbers of local, educated "volunteers." Workers who become active within the growing programs are rewarded with patronage union positions that offer a combination of additional pay and power.

Labor also continues to endorse and fund local nonpartisan candidates, and manages to do it without creating the divisions within their own ranks that are the basis of the argument against GOP endorsements at this level. In fact, this local activity has served the unions' cause by securing alliances with various local coalitions, placing labor sympathizers on "Republican" staffs, and strengthening the growth of precinct programs.

How should the GOP respond? By re-emphasizing basic Party programs —

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