

## **Funding the Next Generation Conference**

Keynote Address by Larry Tramutola  
September 25, 2013

I am thrilled to be a part of this conference, to be with many old friends and to make many new ones.

Twenty-five years ago, I was substitute teaching in the Oakland Schools. It was then that I became keenly aware of the physical condition of California schools.

They were, in a word, embarrassing.

Schools were over crowded, many were unsafe, technology consisted of an overhead projector perhaps, science classrooms were almost non existent, counseling rooms were often old storage closets, and the bathrooms were so disgusting you didn't even want to go.

This wasn't just true in Oakland; you could find the same conditions in every school district around the state.

Yet, this was only part of the tragedy. The greater tragedy was that elected officials, both locally and at the state level, were aware of the problem but did little to solve it. There was a lot of talk and a lot of finger pointing, as there always is, but talk is cheap and the solutions to the problems cost billions of dollars. And of course competition for dollars is always keen and there were other needs from roads to prisons. And parents in most communities make up less than 15% of the electorate.

To make matters worse, tax measures in California were required to get 2/3rds support from voters for passage— which seemed impossible.

Today however, California is experiencing a renaissance in school facilities. Just blocks from where we are today new schools are being built which are some of the finest in the world. And while we are far from where we want or need to be, as a state we are making significant progress.

So what happened? Did the state finally fund schools? Did we elect new leaders who were visionary and bold?

No. Unfortunately none of that is true. California still ranks at close to the bottom of all the states in educational funding. And, No, our elected leaders today are no better than they were two decades ago.

So what happened? What happened rarely gets talked about, but it is a lesson that we would be wise to understand as we look at other challenges we face. And

it's a lesson that you need to learn as you look to make a difference in your local community.

The lesson is we organized. We organized locally. We didn't wait for the state or for elected officials to act.

In communities around the state, parents and teachers organized and we began talking to voters who didn't have children in schools. We began winning elections, one by one by one. Sure there were losses, but in even in the losses we learned and we got better. We began passing local tax measures in Northern California, Southern California -- from Calexico to Del Norte in big school districts and tiny rural districts.

Each community organized and instead of blaming Sacramento or someone else, we talked about what WE could do in our OWN community for the children who lived here.

We bypassed Sacramento and the politicians and built a network of people who wanted to make a difference in their own local community. We organized in rich districts and poor districts, in rural and urban areas. We talked to Republicans and Democrats. We focused on likely voters who we knew would vote. In the end we proved that even Republicans care about kids and that not all of them are against taxes, they just want their tax dollars spent in their own community.

We didn't call ourselves a movement, or even acknowledge that we were a movement, but that is in fact what we were. Hundreds of billions of dollars were passed by voters and every penny went into new school construction.

As often happens, when the people lead, politicians follow, and in time the Legislature under pressure from their constituents put on the ballot a measure (Prop 39) that reduced the threshold for passing bond measures for schools to 55%.

We had even more success and today, you would be hard pressed to find a community that has not passed a tax measure for schools.

So what are your lessons as we move forward today? I outline many of them in my book *Sidewalk Strategies*. But here are the highlights.

Don't wait for someone to solve your problem. Work for what you believe in/what you are passionate about.

Think locally. Everything is local. How will what you do affect local children? Be creative. (Santa Monica)

Don't give up. Make progress every day. (Difference between winning and losing is often the work you do day by day)

Reach out beyond your circle of friends and supporters. Build a network of people who are willing to work. People power must be visible.

Keep things simple. Don't over reach. Accomplish what you say you are going to accomplish. (Don't overreach. We can't solve all the problems, but we can solve some.)

Don't be afraid to lose. The only people who lose are those that either don't try or give up.

Enjoy the process. Enjoy the fight. Celebrate success

One final caution.

As the title of this conference is: **How we fund the next generation**, we need to be mindful that it is the NEXT Generation we are concerned about, not our own jobs, our own careers, or our own pensions.

The public is growing skeptical of programs that say they are helping kids when the real beneficiaries are the adults who work in the programs.

Oakland for example has over 25 job training programs that cost taxpayers over \$9 million a year, but no jobs to place people in them. The beneficiaries of the programs it could be said are the people who work in the programs, not the unemployed.

Public trust is a precious gift. If we lose it, we will never get it back. Each of us has the responsibility to make sure that what we say we are going to do, we do. We don't defend programs that don't work. We need to be our biggest critics.

As change makers we must not defend the status quo or institutions that don't do what they purport to do. We must find ways to do things better and more efficiently. We can't expect taxpayers to support the expansion of programs, or the creation of new ones if we don't provide to the public evidence that we are making a difference.

Recently Michele Obama was introduced to a woman who told Mrs. Obama that she was someone who volunteers for the Children's Support League, an entity that raises funds and provides grants to non-profits who help needy children.

Michele Obama thanked her for her hard work and said something we should all take to heart: She said: "I hope there will be less need for those funds and programs in the future."

I agree, but until that day comes, and it may never come, we need to continue the fight, continue to organize, and continue to build power.