



The Story of the Reluctant Leader *or* How I Led a Small Group of Citizens to a 4-1 School Board Victory

By Victoria J Saunders

In June, a small group of arts leaders in San Diego successfully campaigned to keep the San Diego Unified School District from eliminating the arts. The district's board was voting on whether or not to eliminate the Visual and Performing Arts Department as a means to help balance its budget for 2009-2010. The District faced a \$180 million gap, an astronomical figure even for the second largest school district in California. But the Visual and Performing Arts Department (VAPA) was the only curricular department on the list of cuts and the costs of losing the department, by our estimations, would far exceed the \$3.2 million they would save by eliminating it.

I have had a lot of people e-mail me since our win on June 2 with praise and interest in how we did it. Since I led the effort, I was [interviewed](#) for the California Alliance for Arts Education newsletter and it continues to be the best documentation of our efforts and the role that carefully constructed advocacy played in our success. I won't recount that part of the story because you can find it [online](#). What I do want to share is my leadership experience—that is to say, the experience of a “reluctant leader”—with the hope that it will inspire others to lead (less reluctantly).

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When I learned that the District included the VAPA Department on the list of options for budget reductions, I thought to myself, “Oh God, it's happened.” In San Diego, the VAPA Department has quietly done great work over the last few years, and it hadn't been threatened by the budget axe since 1998. So we had kind of been sitting on our laurels. Try as we might, there is no specific agency or organization in San Diego that acts as an arts education partnership or other leadership organization



dedicated to arts education. I had been complaining about the lack of leadership around this issue for years. So when I realized we needed to start seriously advocating to maintain the Department, I also realized that there was no one to go to. We have a well-functioning Regional Arts and Culture Coalition which advocates

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each year for city arts funding very successfully. So it was the first place to which I turned. In speaking with its chair, Dalouge Smith, it occurred to both of us, that if it was going to get done, I was going to have to lead the charge.

It was at this point that I got in touch with my inner-reluctance. I am a consultant with paying clients who help put food on my table and a roof over my head and keep me busy. My initial thoughts were: I don't know how to do this; I've never led an advocacy effort; I don't have time; I have other work to do; this could get messy; I research and write about leadership and arts education, I don't actually DO it; and finally, If I agree to do it...I'm committed to the end. Then I thought to myself, "If I don't do this and we lose the department, I will regret doing nothing for the rest of my life." And so it began. I found I had a great teacher in Dalouge Smith, I had cheerleaders and co-leaders in arts and arts education colleagues, Patti Saraniero and David Plettner, and I had 10 people from the arts community in my living room during our first meeting willing to follow my lead and help out over the next three months.

It was easier than I anticipated, almost natural and intuitive. We lined up meetings with a few school board members, created a Facebook page, started an e-mail campaign, did our research, and created our talking points. People looked to me for guidance and strategy and I was encouraged by their enthusiasm to help. Everywhere I turned, people got behind the campaign and I helped lead them. I don't want to make it sound seamless or overly simple, but what I'm trying to say is that when one is in the middle of something that they believe in, figuring out how to do it becomes easier. When you are guided by a sense of purpose and vision, you can inspire others to act and do things they don't see themselves doing either. In the end we won four out of five school board votes. It wouldn't have turned out that



way, I'm convinced, were it not for our efforts. I never worried about losing the department; I couldn't lose faith or have time to get lost in what-ifs. I simply kept moving forward with my eye on the prize and the belief that the right decision would be made if the arguments were cogent, passionate, and articulate.

I could not have accomplished my role and purpose as the leader had it not been for the encouragement and enthusiasm of those who agreed to work with me and every person who helped along the way. So my message here is, if you find yourself passionate about something and that something is in need of leadership, don't let the excuses keep you from stepping forward and taking it on. It could be the most gratifying use of your limited time and very capable, inner resources you'll ever experience.

As a post script, it should be noted that the department is back on the list of budget reductions for 2010-2011. Our work is just begun and we're not letting up now.

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