

## **Local politics: Few voters engage until they are on the bubble**

The City of Rocklin, California, has been the recipient of 4 years of significant political pressure from regional groups that include LGBT activists, BLM and Antifa. Three separate events, which occurred roughly every 18 months, have been exploited via joint efforts with regional television stations in an effort to change local school government policies.

Each event struck different groups in the community and I would offer the combination of attacks caused two main reactions:

- 1) 'Some' Rocklin parents removed their children from the K-12 Rocklin Unified School District – as of the 2020-21 school year about 1,500 children or about 10% of the 12,000 forecasted RUSD students have left the district
- 2) 'Some' Rocklin parents banded together and successfully elected 3 'pro parent' members to the RUSD board.

It is clear that the three events created a breakdown in parents' belief that they could manage local school government. For some it resulted in a lack of willingness to interact with the school board which can be measured by students exiting the district and the declining parent attendance at school board meetings. Other groups galvanized and were able to replace 3 board members. That said- an important facet of the Rocklin events was that real voter action did not occur until after the RUSD adopted a large set of policies. In short it was not until enough political subgroups were impacted that voters (parents) acted.

Rocklin's late action is a cautionary tale for other cities.

American voters tend to focus on national and state issues. They tend to see local issues as simple and not important and demonstrate this belief by participating in local elections at about half of the rate they participate in federal elections.

This a lack of voter participation on local issues leaves the door open to bad actors and bad actions at the local level. In Rocklin, bad actors were able to take action before parents could build a political group. An important part of Rocklin's cautionary tale is that a lack of a focus on local political issues prevents the formation of the local political groups, which are by their nature, based on local interpersonal bonds. These interpersonal networks are the building blocks of any political action and these networks sustain your political effort when its attacked.

If the axiom that 'all politics is local' is true, part of the reason it is true is because local relationships provide voters with some level of personal security to speak out and act. As residents were attacked by local news outlets, LGBT, BLM and Antifa, Rocklin residents learned hard lessons. Groups following Mr. Alinsky's Rules for Radicals used several techniques including frequent, personal attacks on individuals which taught Rocklin residents that if you do not have a local support network, you cannot sustain your political effort. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Alinsky's 13 Rules for Radicals can be found here: <https://steelonsteel.com/saul-alinsky-rules-for-radicals/>

This article covers three events that occurred to Rocklin over the last 3+ years. While it could be seen as conspiratorial to suggest that these events were strategically linked, its important to point out that the 3 events:

- 1) Started with attacks on smaller groups in the city
- 2) Built on successes of prior efforts
- 3) Allowed the attackers to link and consolidate their efforts
- 4) Groups that were under attack took some time (18 months +) to understand that there was an attack - and that they needed to learn to work together

### **2017: Rocklin Academy Charter School Parents <sup>2</sup>**

In summer 2017 Rocklin Academy's <sup>3</sup> Gateway campus supported a 5 year old student's announcement to their kindergarten class that they were transitioning from one sex to another.

The announcement was done on the last day of school and parents were not told ahead of time that the event was to take place.

The event created several sets of issues. One of the most significant was that the parents learned about the event over the summer as some children began to share the incident. This imperfect dissemination of information made it difficult for the parents to open communication with each other, which delayed the development of an effective response. The fact that the school did not tell the parents about the event and the fact that the school quickly partnered with national media to cover the event required parents to juggle three imperatives:

- 1) Children's fears that they could 'magically' change sex
- 2) A need to seek to understand what actually happened: Was it a mistake on the school's part? Was it deliberate? How did this event impact their child?
- 3) A need to understand that to resist the school parents needed to create political networks, which is the first step to political power, and requires significant communication 'effort' between the parents.

Within about a month, the event became a national media news storm with nightly/weekly coverage for most of the balance of the summer.

While the parents struggled individually with items 1-3, several allies moved to support the Rocklin Academy (RA) Charter Schools. The RA Charter schools, were then, and are still now, seen as a nationally ranked educational powerhouse. The RA Charter Schools' standing created networked relationships with the California Charter School Association (CCSA) and (somewhat ironically) with the LGBT wing of the California Democratic Party who see school choice as path to lift up disadvantaged communities.

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<sup>2</sup> Not included in this timeline is the suspension of Ms. J Benzel a teacher at RUSD's Rocklin High School. She was suspended for stating (to her students) that the RUSD was willing to support a student walk out to protest gun violence but not support a protest against abortion. This event drew significant national media attention however it failed to turn into an event with specific local political repercussions. However, it was for many an indication of the RUSD's political position and its an important event to include in the overall timeline.

<sup>3</sup> Rocklin Academy (RA) is a charter school system headquarters in Rocklin. The RUSD has oversight over a portion of the RA School System.

CCSA and Democratic LGBT groups quickly provided the RA leadership team professional media spokespeople and very favorable news coverage of an event at what is a small (2,000 student) local 'Family of (charter) schools'. While kindergarten students and parents were still struggling with 'the what happened' part of their process, RA leadership and CNN defined the parents' reactions to the event as religious bigotry.

The national view of the event, the frame, was set before the parents really understood the issue. The parents were defined as bigots resisting a normal event while the classroom teacher who supported the transgender reveal was cast as hero and protector. Over time, the narrative that the school created was so powerful that the teacher was not disciplined for staging the event and was not disciplined for not telling parents what was to occur. In fact, within about a 12 months after the event, the RA leadership was able to secure the teacher a regional teacher of the year award.

At the time of the event, parents in the city of Rocklin collected into four groups:

- 1) Parents who are pro- LGBT- this group saw nothing wrong with the event
- 2) Parents who felt impacted by the event – but could not find a path to resist the incident as they did not have the time, skills, and/or were not able to risk alienating the community (or the RA leadership)
- 3) Parents who looked for a path to resist the RA narrative
- 4) Parents who did not think the event was 'right' but did not see it impacting their kids and - therefore did not feel a need to act

Group (4) is an important group as it represented a significant majority of the city's ~30,000 voters. These members of the community did not see how the event, at a small 'charter school', could impact their school district or their city.

Group (3) represented about 1,000 voters who would struggle for 18 months to create political resistance.

**Significant lessons that can be collected from this event:**

1) The ability to create quick, national (or regional media) coverage provides significant advantages as it allows you to capture resources to your cause by defining the narrative first. A goal of quick coverage is to locate allies, who do not have time to be experts on your cause but still chose to support your effort. Quick action provides a path to find allies who can bring expertise and other resources to your effort.

2) The RA Board is a self-appointed school board. Parents spent considerable time working to pressure the board to 'act' only to learn that the board was supportive of the teacher and the transgender reveal to 5 and 6 year old students. The nature of a self-appointed board, which does not stand for elections, prevented the parents from putting any real pressure on the board. Efforts spent to pressure the RA Board could have been more productively used for other actions as the self-appointed board is insulated from traditional political pressure.

3) A national expert reached out to the parents became their spokesperson/project manager. This expert's effort had mixed results. Item (2) was not well understood and initial parent discussions created a belief that this was a board 'issue' to solve. That choice left the parents with little time to (a) frame a narrative and/or (b) develop a network of allies.

4) With the exception of only one leader, local religious leadership chose not to engage. Effort spent on item (2) could have been re-directed to pressure local religious leaders and may have produced better results for the parents.

5) Parents did not understand how the different levels of political leadership work – or don't work-together. Parents mistakenly sought out state and federal representatives in a hope that they could change the RA Board's actions.

6) While over the last 10+ years, Rocklin has consistently voted 55% Republican, 5% Libertarian and 40% Democrat, Rocklin local political leadership, felt that the impact of this issue was restricted to the RA Charter School community. Most members of the community incorrectly labeled the publicly funded charter school as a private school and felt that they were not obligated to take action on the issue. This lack of interest was clearly expressed by both regular citizens and city level elected officials. Effort spent on (2) may have been more productively spent on this issue.

7) The state legislature was reviewing legislation on similar issues at the same time the event happened. The RA team used the direction of the state legislation to blunt parent requests for action by skillfully suggesting that they had to support the transgender reveal as it aligned with state legislation. It is important to understand what paths local governments have to resist state/federal mandates. In many cases, schools can take a wait and see approach and be a late (or non-adopter) of many mandates.

## **2018/2019: \$1M LGBT curriculum purchase by RUSD**

In the wake of the RA LGBT incident, a former board member of the RA 'Family of Schools' ran to join the Rocklin Unified School District Board (RUSD). The RA charter schools contain 2,000 students while the RUSD contains about 12,000.

The community saw this candidate, Mr. Rick Miller, as a good choice for the RUSD board. Mr. Miller is an executive of a large educational nonprofit that works with several of the largest school districts in the state to create systems to increase student performance. Mr. Miller is known and liked in the community and is seen as a superior youth soccer coach.

During the 2018 RUSD school campaign, parents impacted by the RA event shared concerns with local leaders that, if elected, Mr. Miller would be supportive of a LGBT educational agenda. These parents pointed out to the city council, and church leaders that Mr. Miller had been associated with parts of a LGBT agenda that had been under construction at the state capital.

These voter's concerns did not change the minds of the local city or religious leadership and Mr. Miller won his bid for a RUSD board seat.

Within 6 months he chaired a RUSD board meeting that shepherded the adoption of a new \$1M, K-6 social studies curriculum. A focus of this new curriculum was to share LGBT lifestyles to primary school students. (Grades K-6)

The RUSD's choice to adopt a \$1M 'pro LGBT' curriculum for grades K-6 also became a national media event. Once again, Rocklin, California, (population 75,000) was in the spotlight and local parents were again under pressure to understand how to (a) guide their children through challenges that were created by actions that were political in nature and (b) develop an effective political response.

### **Significant lessons learned from this event:**

- 1) Local voter groups need to develop the expertise needed to discern intentions and actions of opposing groups. Without background information on candidates, voters were unable to frame narratives and communicate with other groups to create a voter coalition (network) large enough to defeat Mr. Miller's larger, and more organized group. The creation of small interest groups, using little more than a facebook page, can be an effective way to send questions to candidates to help understand their positions.
- 2) Local voter groups need to understand how to collect and compare prior election voting data so that they can adequately understand local voting trends and groups. In California, prior year vote totals from local elections, can be collected from the County Elections office. An example Placer County's election 'results' data is located here: <https://www.placercountyelections.gov/election-night-results/>
- 3) Local voters need understand how to locate and review a candidate's donor list. A review of the donor list can provide an understanding of how the donor is linked to local, regional and national groups. Local groups were able to learn that regional and national groups had made donations to

Miller's RUSD campaign. These donors also donated to other local candidates who were running for other offices in the same election cycle as Mr. Miller. The donations to these other candidates were connected to confirming a candidate's support for Mr. Miller's candidacy to the school board. A rough review of donations to either Mr. Miller - or by groups aligned with Mr. Miller to other candidates- suggests that the total amount spent to elect Mr. Miller was about three times that of a typical candidate in a typical RUSD election cycle - or about \$40,000.

In California, collection and review of candidate donor information is governed by a state board known as the Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC). FPPC regulations on "campaign finance disclosure" are complex and can require that donor data is reported to cities, counties and/or the state, depending on the group making the donation. Further, FPPC regulations can allow for some donations to be reported long after the expenditure was made. FPPC donor information can be found here:

<https://fppc.ca.gov/transparency.html> Placer County donor information can be found here:

<https://www.placercountyelections.gov/campaign-finance-disclosure/>

5) Most local office holders will shun openly opposing candidates for other political entities (ex. city council board members will not oppose school board candidates). However, an elected (sitting) office holder has significant connections with voters and groups. Local voters interested in making changes should consider working to bring other officials into efforts to oppose (or support) their candidate. Voter groups in Rocklin were only able to defeat their opponents once these other elected officials chose to join their effort. It is a visible sign of a community's level of engagement when local political leaders openly join any effort.

**2021: Rocklin's Whitney High School year book cover featured BLM and 'white shame' messages. Whitney's High School's back to school club day shuns Turning Point USA student club <sup>4</sup>**

As students returned from covid lockdowns to campus, Whitney High School held a student club day and the event again placed Rocklin in the national media. Students asserted that that during the high school's student club day event, the High School's Turning Point USA club was moved from the center of the event venue to the edge of the venue. During the move process, the Turning Point club members assert they were told by school leaders that their group was inappropriate and that they needed to take down their club banners and logos.

In addition to being relocated during the club event, the students' yearbook picture was altered and Turning Point USA's student club member's logos and slogans were removed from their yearbook picture.

At a later date, the community learned that the yearbook's cover had a picture of a BLM protest with slogans that reminded white people that they could not see their white privilege.

**Significant lessons that can be collected from this event:**

- 1) BLM and Antifa have 'clubs' in Sacramento and they would work together to bring 30 to 60 protesters to Rocklin to put pressure on the city. Their joint efforts would attack groups that opposed not just BLM (or property rights) but also groups that could be seen as opponents of LBGT or anti Covid causes. Called 'Direct Action' these groups' twitter feeds clearly showed an ability to plan and execute protests in a city about 30 miles away from their club's home city.
- 2) Antifa Sacramento was an integral part of the Sacramento BLM protests in Rocklin. Many local voters did not realize that the two worked together- possibly because the Antifa team members, dressed in their 'black bloc' uniforms, did not speak to press and were not labeled as Antifa members by the press.
- 3) 'Direct action' efforts also included BLM/Antifa members who acted as news reporters and they came with camera crews. These BLM/Antifa reporting teams seemed to have valid press credentials and connections with regional TV reporters who would run supportive new stories on regional news stations using the BLM/Antifa content.
- 4) Political leaders in Rocklin did not understand that 'Direct Action' could also include communication by (a) emails (b) letters (c) phone calls to support political issues that city council/school boards/county

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<sup>4</sup> Two events that were significant but are not included in this review are noted here: (a) 2020: Rocklin Academy's acquisition of Ruhkala Elementary school generated a 500 parent protest as RUSD and RA students had to be relocated and (b) a 2019 ad campaign by the RUSD suggesting that the RUSD needed \$500M in bonds to pay for district wide deferred building maintenance caused significant comments from parents. The latter's significance, is based in part on the following facts (a) bonds for about half of the 15 schools in the district are still being amortized and (b) the RUSD's annual budget is \$100M – and they have been operating with higher than average amounts spent on teacher salaries for several years.

boards were reviewing. The level of effort that could be brought by joint BLM/Antifa ‘Direct Action’ communication efforts is still not appreciated by local leaders. To be effective, voters have to appreciate and balance efforts from groups like BLM/Antifa (or similar) to ensure that communication from local voters is not drowned out.

**Closing thoughts: Only those on the bubble get engaged- but – to win you need to have more political ‘energy’ than your opponent**

The impact of these events over the last four years has been significant and mostly negative.

Before these events, most taxpayers and parents thought the school district was performing well. The RUSD’s ~500 teachers were able to drive a narrative, that when combined with natural human tendencies to avoid disagreement, prevented discussions of problems within the school district. For many years, Rocklin community leaders controlled the debate and normalized the idea that many topics were closed to real discussion.

Most in the community were unaware the union was overtly driving any narrative within the community. However, within Rocklin, the union was driving the narrative that (a) teachers’ pay in Rocklin should be as much, if not more, than the surrounding districts and (b) slowing or reducing teachers’ pay would have a negative impact on students because good teachers would leave seeking higher pay. Over time, the union was able to work with local leaders to create this as a ‘fact’ and then stifle disagreement and create intolerance toward contrary narratives.

19<sup>th</sup> Century French author Alexander de Tocqueville pointed out that Americans can fall prey to group think, which he called the “tyranny of the majority.” In this case, Rocklin community leaders controlled the debate and normalized the idea that many topics were closed to discussion.

The community’s decision to close debate on teachers’ salary was significant. This choice, in effect, ended the communities’ debate as to a teacher’s value. Stifling debate on teacher value also changed how voters perceived their role in the management of the RUSD school system and many felt it was reduced to a point that they could not impact the system. In some ways, Rocklin’s choice to block a debate on teacher salary was a forfeiture of responsibility which gave control of the RUSD to a “tyranny of the majority”. Had the community vigorously debated the issue, it would have built a much stronger set of political personalities and/or groups who (most likely) would have been prepared for later political events.

Until the city had endured the events mentioned above, subgroups willing to push back on this dereliction of responsibility found themselves debating with each other rather than the “ruling class.” It took time for those willing to stand against a one-way-only system to realize their fractured state would never make a difference.

Taking part in local political systems is the only path of real resistance. Voicing concerns, debating leaders and joining groups to both listen, and discuss, local issues is the only way to prevent bad actors from hijacking local boards and councils.



One organization that was able to coalesce ideas and help local voters was the Placer County Republican Central Committee (PCRCC). Their leaders, similar to precinct committeemen, were the quickest to reach out. After Mr. Miller was seen as a threat the PCRCC did work with parents to develop communication paths to local elected officials. They also shared needed skills and resources such as those mentioned above. To emerging groups, the importance of precinct support cannot be understated. It helped parents sustain their issues when they were pressured by larger, savvier regional opponents, such as the LGBT lobby.

It is not important that everyone agree on every issue, but it important to recognize when groups become dictatorial or have collected too much power. Allowing one side to coalesce into group-think dominance is both dangerous. One has to appreciate the mechanisms of such maneuvering; learn from it and form allies against it. Sun Tzu said it best, "Keep your friends close and your enemies even closer."

**Final Framework for success:**

Define: Goals, Resources, Measurements

- 1) What are our goals? Why? What is the outcome?
- 2) What resources/people/ money are required for success
- 3) What event(s) should we see if we are moving towards our goal?
- 4) What option exist if we are not successful that can get us closer to our goal?
- 5) How will the other groups react? How long can they resist?