

THEY HAVE WAITED LONG ENOUGH

Miguel Fraguela

Writer's comment: *Our children are our future....* It is amazing that so many people do not seem to fully grasp this simple and yet utmost important principle. About two years ago I saw a television program that showed the horrible conditions of California public school buildings. It really did not make any sense to me. How can the richest state in the United States not be able to afford to provide decent schools for its children? When I was given the task to write a research paper, I immediately knew that this was the very question I was going to try to address.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Gary Goodman for encouraging me to write a strong paper and making me believe that this topic really does deserve an audience. I truly enjoyed her challenging course (English 101) and learned a lot from her innovative teaching methods.

— *Miguel Fraguela*

Instructor's comment: Required to write an analytic research paper on any topic they choose, in my Advanced Writing course, many idealistic students go awry. They want to tackle huge social and political problems - affirmative action, bilingual education, the breakdown of the family, negative attitudes about immigration. From ambition, zeal, or fear of oversimplifying complex problems, many resist focusing, then the research or writing overwhelms them. Miguel's purposeful analysis of public school conditions in Sacramento models the benefits of focusing: a manageable (although challenging) investigation, yielding effective concrete evidence, and still permitting causal analysis of the larger problem of inadequate educational funding. While his unusual approach required meticulous research in primary sources, Miguel created a persuasive original analysis that provokes fresh thinking.

— *Gary Sue Goodman, English Department*

BETSY INCHAUSTI HOPES THAT NO RAIN WILL COME TO SACRAMENTO TODAY. She, like most of us, detests the gloomy, soggy days when Mother Nature releases her tears of rain. Her reasons for disliking rain, however, are a bit more significant than ours. While we despise the thought of rain because it gets our clothes wet, slows down traffic and keeps us trapped inside stuffy rooms, Mrs. Inchausti fears for her children. You see, Betsy Inchausti is the principal at Earl Warren Elementary, a school in South Sacramento near Fruitridge Road. Built in 1948, Earl Warren desperately needs roof repairs. For the children and teachers of Earl Warren, it is not a question of whether the water will come into the classrooms, but of which wall, ceiling, or light fixture will give way. "Some of these roofs should have been replaced perhaps 20 years ago," explains Mrs. Inchausti, a remark constantly echoed by school administrators throughout the Sacramento Unified School District (Anderluh, 1998).

The situation is not good. Most schools in the Sacramento School District are thirty to forty years old and a large majority of them are falling apart. Including elementary, middle, and high schools, we have 77 public schools in our Sacramento Unified School District. On average, *each* school needs 14.6 million dollars just to cover the most basic repairs (Ochoa, 1997). In fact, in one survey 74 out of the 77 schools reported needing major repairs and/or upgrades in their campuses (Goodridge, Kollars, Wiegand, 1997). One of the biggest problems of many schools is the lack of air conditioning in their classrooms. Only 12 out of the 77 schools in our District have fully operational air conditioning systems. Thirty-three schools have no air conditioning systems at all and the remaining schools' A/C systems need repair (Erwin, 1997). But the air conditioning merely scrapes the surface of the problem. Peeling paint, leaking roofs, broken windows, falling tiles, useless heating systems, faulty plumbing, unkempt school yards/lawns, poor lighting in classrooms and hallways, rusty lockers, broken public announcement systems, outdated/hazardous electrical wiring that does not support computer systems (and other new technology), all are common complaints of public schools in Sacramento and throughout California (Edicott, 1997).

Why have we allowed our schools to deteriorate to this point? The answer is not simple. Several individual variables have played roles in the degeneration of our schools, but the blame can be focused on two broad groups of individuals. First, are the politicians of this state who have shown a great lack of initiative and concern for school building maintenance over the last 20 years. Second and most importantly, are the misinformed, uncommitted, stingy voters of the state of California.

The origin of the problem can be traced back twenty years. In 1978, Californians experienced an enormous seven billion-dollar surplus at a time when state general fund spending was roughly 15 billion dollars per year. This fueled the notion that government was unnecessarily taxing the people of the state. That same year voters passed the tax-limiting Proposition 13 that took away the government's ability to raise property taxes (Walters, 1998). The new law required two-thirds of voters' approval before passing any new or additional taxes (Endicott, 1997). What people did not realize back then was the major impact that this new law would have on the maintenance of public schools. Prior to 1978, whenever a school needed repairs, the state government would simply take out a bond for the amount of money needed and use property taxes as the means to repay the bond. The passage of Proposition 13 took this power away from the government and with that also went the method to raise money to fix our schools (Tachibana, 1985).

Proposition 13 thus placed the power in the voters' hands and left them responsible for increasing taxes to generate bonds when school repairs were needed. To be responsible, voters had to keep up with the needs of school maintenance. Sadly, this has not happened. To this day most voters are still not fully aware of how bad the conditions are in our public schools. For this reason it has been extremely difficult to get enough people to vote for bonds that help school districts. To get two-thirds of voters to agree on

anything is a hard thing to do in itself. To get two-thirds of uneducated voters to agree on something is an almost impossible feat to accomplish. This has proven to be especially true for the Sacramento Unified School District. Most of our attempts to raise bonds for school maintenance have had the majority of votes in their favor but, thanks to Proposition 13, only one-third of voters - an undemocratic minority - have controlled the final outcome (Plassmeyer, 1997).

Since the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978, politicians have not found alternate ways to raise money and state funding for school maintenance has steadily declined (Engellener 1997b). During the late 80s and early 1990's government officials in California were concerned with giving tax breaks to large corporations, claiming that such tactics were necessary to help create jobs that Californians desperately needed during the recession years. These tax breaks took hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue that could have otherwise been used for fixing our schools. During these years legislators used our lagging economy as an alibi to help the rich (the multi-million dollar companies), while completely ignoring the question of education and school maintenance (Jacobs, 1997b). The little money that the California government did manage to give was, for the most part, used only for purchasing books, increasing teacher salaries, and purchasing other classroom materials (Engellener, 1997b).

Several factors have contributed to the voters' unwillingness to pass measures to help school maintenance. One comment often heard among those that vote against such initiatives is that they mistrust the members of our school board (Endicott, 1997). Many voters believe that these members will use the money dishonestly or manage it unwisely, squandering it on unnecessary programs that will not benefit the children or improve the conditions of the schools. This lack of faith in those running the Sacramento Unified School District has undoubtedly played a major role in preventing many of the proposals from achieving the two-thirds voter approval.

Another unlikely reason was the passage of the California Lottery Initiative in 1984, a measure passed to aid school funding. According to the initiative, a certain percentage of the proceeds gained from the sales of California lottery tickets automatically goes toward helping schools attain what they need. Unfortunately, this initiative has created a false sense of security among voters in California. Most people believe that the California Lottery provides a large amount of money for our schools and their maintenance (Erwin, 1997). That, regrettably, is not the case. In 1995 the lottery only contributed 6.3 million to schools in California (Erwin, 1997). That figure accounts for less than three percent of California's total school budget. In addition, schools that receive lottery money can use the funds *only for instructional purposes* - school books, classroom materials, computers, computer equipment, library books, etc. (Endicott, 1998). This means that, since the lottery initiative started, not one red cent of the proceeds have gone toward repairing our ailing school buildings.

In November 1988, we briefly managed to turn our attention towards our children, schools, and education, when Proposition 98 was voted into law. Proposition 98, a pro-education measure, was designed to ensure that at least forty percent of the state's general fund revenues would go directly to public schools (Jacobs, 1997a). With the passage of this proposition our schools expected to be able to rely on a steady revenue system to provide the funds needed for educational purposes and school maintenance problems. This, however, has not been the case. In 1997, nine years after Proposition 98 became law, California actually spent 145 dollars *less* per student than it did the year before the proposition passed (after adjusting for inflation). So, why hasn't Proposition 98 worked? The burden lies partially on the state's economic woes. In 1990 California began to plummet into a severe recession that put its budget in the red zone. By 1991, the budget deficit was a whopping 14 billion (Jacobs, 1997b) and, as a result, in 1992, California's government voted to suspend some of Proposition 98's provisions (Walters, 1997b). Although the state's recession lasted only until 1994, it was not until 1996 that the state economy became stable enough to divert all of Proposition 98's funds back to the schools (Jacobs, 1997a).

With the end of our recession, focus shifted once again toward poor academic performance of California school children. Government began to spend our long awaited Proposition 98 dollars on raising teachers' salaries and providing students with current textbooks and other classroom materials (Walters, 1997a). School maintenance was once again neglected. In 1996, Pete Wilson, ignoring reports indicating that class sizes (between 13-40 students) are independent of academic performance (Ge, 1997), introduced his classroom size reduction plan as the means to improve California students' overall academic achievement. This plan, aimed at reducing class sizes for the first three or four grades, allows teachers to spend more time with individual students. This, Wilson has claimed, will undoubtedly improve the standards of California elementary schools. The class reduction project has been widely publicized by the press and has enjoyed approval by a large majority of the general population and government officials (Jacobs, 1997a). This has encouraged Pete Wilson to continue with full force, spending *over one billion* dollars in a class reduction program that will most likely fail to produce any profound increases in student achievement while leaving the problem of school maintenance unresolved ("Not a Golden...", 1997).

In 1996 and 1997 the educated public and school officials made a strong push to bring into the spotlight the great problem that school maintenance had become. Several initiatives and propositions for bonds dedicated exclusively to improving the conditions of school buildings were presented on ballots. Throughout the state many of these propositions were successfully promoted and passed by two-thirds of voters. School districts in San Francisco, San Jose, Fresno, Los Angeles, Marin and other areas passed a large majority of the propositions designed to aid school repairs ("Schools, Services Score...", 1997). For the Sacramento Unified School District, the story was quite different. In 1996 the 225 million-dollar bond Measure E - one of the largest school maintenance propositions ever - was narrowly defeated at the polls (Stemmler, 1997). The problem proved once again to be a combination of lack of voter turn out and the two-thirds majority needed to pass the bonds. Only 25 percent of registered voters were dedicated enough to show up at the polls and *only* 66.4% of them agreed to pass the measure - 260 votes short of the 66.6 % Proposition 13 required (Ochoa, 1997). In 1997, history again repeated itself, as another 225 million-dollar school bond, Measure U, was also narrowly defeated at the polls, although over 65% of voters approved the measure (Endicott, 1997).

For the California economy, 1998 has been an extremely prosperous year. The unemployment rate is down, inflation has held steady, and interest rates have stayed low, resulting in a huge budget surplus for California. Last month, Pete Wilson boasted that the California budget would have a 4.4 billion dollar surplus this year (Walters, 1998). This should be an incredible opportunity for education and school buildings to get the money they desperately need. Pete Wilson, however, already seems to have other priorities in mind. Last month, he announced plans to cut vehicle taxes by at least 75 percent. Vehicle taxes give local governments nearly 4 billion dollars a year in revenues. Since his announcement, many Democrats have suggested that instead, the state should use the vehicle tax money to fix our schools. Pete Wilson has rejected that idea, saying that giving money back to the Californian tax payers is his most important priority at this time (Capps, 1998).

Of the 4.4 billion-dollar surplus, the governor has only earmarked 500 million for schools. Many Democrats have argued that that figure should be doubled to one billion, but Governor Wilson has declared that there are no worthy reasons for giving more money to schools (Capps, 1998). *What about using some of that money to fix our decrepit public schools, Mr. Wilson?* Although 500 million extra dollars for schools is a lot of money, it is important for everyone to understand that in reality much more money is needed. In the Sacramento Unified School District alone, which only has 77 schools, an estimated 400 million dollars in basic maintenance repairs are needed (Anderluh, 1998). Five-hundred million extra dollars for the entire state of California seems like a ridiculously small figure when one considers that there are thousands of public schools in the entire state. Even more ridiculous is the fact that those 500 million

that Pete Wilson has set aside for our schools have already been earmarked for new math textbooks, low performing schools, after school programs and remedial summer school programs (Capps, 1998). In other words, if Wilson's budget proposal goes through, the 4.4 billion dollar surplus, the biggest since 1978 (Walters, 1998), will not benefit the conditions of our schools buildings at all.

How can it be possible that we, the politicians and voters of this state, have neglected our school buildings for over twenty years? The issue of school maintenance has always been there, but politicians have never acknowledged it as a worthwhile cause because no one ever wins an election on a platform set on fixing broken-down school buildings. When the education agenda does come up in an election, politicians are eager to give promise speeches that usually involve academic improvements, school reform, new textbooks and making California the world-class school system that it once was. School maintenance is something that most people do not want to talk about. It is topic that has failed to draw much attention and has always been set aside because there always seems to be something more important to attend to (i.e., the vehicle tax). This attitude toward the subject has led people to forget that most of our schools are in severe need of repairs.

Consider for a moment how California children's academic performance compares to kids of other states. The majority of eighth-graders score below minimal standards in science skills in a nationwide test (Walters, 1997a). Only 18 percent of fourth-graders are considered advanced readers (only Mississippi fared worse - 16%). Only 16 percent of eighth-graders do math at or above expected level for their grade ("Not a golden rep...", 1997). The state received the worst score in 10th grade reading, with only 36 percent of the students meeting or exceeding the national average. In spelling, students in grades 1-6 all scored substantially below the national average (De Fao, Kollars & Alcala, 1998). The list continues on and on: California always finds itself at or near the end of the pack. Parents and politicians for years have tried to figure out why kids in California perform so poorly across the board in nationally standardized tests. Many people have been quick to point fingers at several different things: inadequate teachers, old textbooks, poor teaching methods, bilingual kids who bring down the state average, drugs, television, etc., but I have never heard anybody cite the condition of our school buildings as one of the possible reasons for poor academic performance in school.

Imagine that you are a first grader going to an elementary school in Sacramento. During the fall and winter months you are constantly freezing in a 40-degree classroom - the heating system is old and only works half of the time. Some of the windows near the ceiling are broken and the roof leaks. Every time it rains you are one of the six students who have to move their desks to the front of the class because the leaky roof happens to be in your corner of the classroom. You can't concentrate on what the teacher is saying because the drops of rain falling in the bucket distract you. During recess and lunch times you have to watch out for the broken floor and falling ceiling tiles. Most of the concrete in the playground is severely cracked. There are no basketball rims and no grassed areas to play in. During the summer months you sit in a blistering 90-degree classroom for an hour and a half with thirty other students. You cannot concentrate on what the teacher is saying; all you can think of is how long until you get out of class. There is only one working water fountain in the whole school. You are thirsty, but are not allowed to leave the classroom....

Do you think that you would feel good about going to school every weekday? How willing would you be to learn? Would you pay much attention to the teacher? Now picture this scenario repeating itself over and over, every year from your first through 12th grades. How would you feel? Students are subjected to these kinds of conditions daily in the majority of the schools in the Sacramento Unified School District. They learn to have a negative association with school and with learning. When students are asked to perform and to take tests under these conditions, they will do so while thinking about being somewhere else. As these kids get to the older grades, the negative association with school becomes

greater and willingness to learn diminishes. In the long run it is likely that having poorly maintained schools has a real detrimental effect in the development of a child's attitude toward school and learning; for a child, once these attitudes are formed they are very difficult to break and so many of the kids that attend these schools go there and do not feel comfortable. Thinking about it, with schools under these conditions, it is no wonder why our kids are performing poorly in tests - *I wonder how Pete Wilson would respond if he read this?*

What can we expect from the future? If we use the last statewide primary as an indication, the answer is nothing much. In June not a single statewide proposition on the ballot targeted additional funding for schools. In March of this year Democrats attempted to place a 9.2 billion-dollar bond, for school repairs and the building of new schools, in the June primaries. The measure passed the Senate, but under threats from Pete Wilson that he would veto the measure if it passed, the House voted it down (Matthews, 1998). The evidence before us paints a bleak picture for the future of our public schools. It is painfully obvious that (at least) until our current Governor leaves office, our kids will have to continue to wait for their schools to be repaired.

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