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California's Toughest And Most Important Race: Who Will Be The State's Chief School Officer?



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As reporters, political commentators and arm-chair campaign experts continue to weigh in breathlessly about next week's elections, a quiet revolution is underway in California that if successful could change the landscape of public education in America—ultimately impacting one out of every eight children in our nation's public schools.

The most hotly contested race in the Golden State will have no impact on who controls the U.S. House or Senate. It won't impact the gubernatorial race and it certainly won't alter the lopsided Democrat majorities in the California legislature. Nestled 61 pages into the 2014 California Voter guide is perhaps the most important campaign being waged in America today—a campaign to reform the state's broken public school system and shake up the dysfunctional status quo that has fueled a race to the bottom for California's public schools which now rank 45th in the nation. The campaign for California's non-partisan Superintendent of Public Instruction is about much more than which Democrat (as both candidates are Democrats) will be elected the state's chief school officer. It is, as a recent San Diego Union Tribune headline declared, a campaign pitting “reformer versus union” in an election with significant national implications.

“Reformer Vs. Union” Campaign

The reformer is Marshall Tuck, a scrappy, roll-up-your-sleeves and get-to-work fixing our schools, kind of leader. Tuck served most recently as founding CEO of the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, a groundbreaking collaboration with the Los Angeles Unified School District to operate 17 struggling public elementary, middle and high schools serving 15,000 historically underserved students. Under Tuck's leadership, these schools increased four-year graduation rates by over 60% while improving school safety and student attendance. Over the last five

years, the Partnership schools ranked first in academic improvement among school systems with more than 10,000 students.

Tuck understands first-hand the debilitating impact California's all-powerful teacher's union has had on public education. Lifetime tenure decisions are handed out after 18 months; good teachers are losing their jobs because union backed policies give priority to time in grade rather than quality of teaching; and, most importantly, key policies that impact everything from funding to how local districts can save for future financial rainy days are currently negotiated in back rooms in Sacramento where the California Teachers Union reigns supreme. As retired teacher and president of the California Teachers Empowerment Network Larry Sand recently wrote, "In the course of a decade, the CTA has spent more than \$50 million alone lobbying politicians for legislation aimed at protecting and expanding its interests, usually at students' and taxpayers' expense." These same interests have spent millions to defeat Tuck.

Changing the Status Quo

Despite the all-out spending spree of the CTA and its allies, Tuck is actually leading in recent polls. Every major newspaper in the state—both conservative and liberal—has endorsed Tuck. In the latest Field poll, Tuck is winning union households by nearly a 2-1 majority. The reason? Despite the political rhetoric, Tuck's campaign is not anti-teacher or anti-tenure or even anti-union. Tuck is running a campaign to refocus the voices that guide education policy in California to ensure that our teachers, parents and students come before politicians and unions.

The recent landmark "[Vergara](#)" court decision that declared as unconstitutional California's tenure system has served as a lightning rod for unifying all ends of the political spectrum for change. As the San Jose Mercury News noted in its recent editorial endorsement of Tuck: "When the two candidates for state superintendent of public instruction, both Democrats, discuss the (Vergara) case, it's clear why voters should replace incumbent Tom Torlakson with innovative education administrator Marshall Tuck. Torlakson panders to the politically powerful California Teachers Association by defending the status quo. Tuck advocates for immediate changes and understands what must be done."

California voters will have an opportunity on Tuesday to send a clear message that our schools are too important, our great teachers are too valuable and all of our children, regardless of financial ability, deserve a quality education.