

“Unmet Community Information Needs”

Knight Commission On The Information Needs of Communities In A Democracy

Remarks by Matt Hammer

September 8, 2008

First of all, thank you very much to the Knight Foundation for investing in the work of PACT for many years and for the Foundation’s long commitment to this community. Thanks also to Dave Mills of the Knight Foundation for inviting me to participate in this panel and for his passion for helping to make this Valley live up to its awesome potential. For the past 16 years, I’ve been a community organizer in Mississippi and around the southeast United States, in Oakland, California, and here in Silicon Valley, working with grassroots community organizations focused on enabling common, everyday people to participate effectively in the democratic process. I’m the Executive Director of PACT, People Acting In Community Together, one of about 50 similar organizations around the country through the PICO National Network. We’re an organization of hundreds of grassroots leaders – the trusted, connected people in neighborhoods, schools, and religious congregations across San Jose. These grassroots leaders work together to win extraordinary victories for our community, like creating excellent public schools in the poorest neighborhoods in our city and initiating the historic Children’s Health Initiative, which made our county the first in the country to provide access to health insurance to all children.

While PACT’s grassroots leaders span the socio-economic spectrum in the Valley – from very wealthy to very poor – I’d like to focus my comments on the information needs of low-income people in this Valley.

There is some good news. When I was working in Mississippi and Oakland in the 1990s, it was nearly impossible for parents to get important data about their child’s public school. School districts often didn’t have the information that parents wanted: student achievement at one school versus another; the drop-out rate; information disaggregated by race and socio-economic level. Sometimes districts did have this information, but felt no obligation to make it available, much less understandable. It was a big moment in our campaign to create excellent schools in Oakland when some parents and I walked into the district office one afternoon and asked for test data on a number of schools. We’d sought this information before, and never found much useful. But on this lucky afternoon, we just happened to run into a district administrator in a good mood who turned over to us the secrets of the Temple: easy-to-understand bar graphs on student test data for each public school, plus demographic information on the students. We turned these little graphs into a booklet, made hundreds of copies, and got them out to parents and grassroots leaders all over the city. The data made crystal clear to people with little formal education the deep failure in the Oakland public schools. After perusing the booklet, so many parents said to me, Oh, so it’s not just my kid who is failing. Then came the disbelief and anger that the system was so dysfunctional. How could it be that only 5 kids graduated from my child’s high school with the credits to go to a state university? This was the spark we needed to begin a huge movement for comprehensive school reform in Oakland.

So, because of No Child Left Behind and state regulations, districts now have to provide lots of information to the public about their schools. The California Department of Education website, along with websites like GreatSchools.net, have so much great information. But in so many of the neighborhoods where I work, people don't use computers, don't cruise the world wide web, and are not particularly comfortable with the written word. For hundreds of thousands of people in this Valley, the information flowing in and out of their lives is not so different than it would have been 15 years ago.

The renowned populist writer William Greider asked, in a now 15 year-old book with the same title, "Who Will Tell The People?" That question remains a vital challenge to our democracy actually functioning – and, unfortunately, it keeps me in business. PACT still has to spend much of our resources helping common, everyday people to understand data, research, and information that is readily available, as long you're tech-savvy and educated.

These days, rather than taking people down to the District's research and data department, our task is simpler: we bring our laptops into people's living rooms and churches and show them how to navigate the Department of Education's website. (Too bad they don't have those easy to read bar graphs, but it's still packed with powerful information.)

Your Commission was also interested in the extent to which local government makes important information available to the community in a timely way. Our state and local governments have fairly strong "sunshine laws." Many public officials and bureaucrats in our Valley are committed to an informed public. But we still have a very, very long way to go. Too many of them continue to act like the public – particularly the *organized* public, as represented by an organization like PACT – is a nuisance, if not the enemy; an obstacle to the otherwise efficient functioning of their agency.

Let me give you an example of this: Grassroots volunteer leaders in our organization initiated the creation of the highest-scoring public schools in Alum Rock, the poorest part of the Valley. Children at these schools are on a college track and scoring practically as high as children in the wealthiest neighborhoods. But because the District feels threatened by the success of these schools, they have sought to undermine them again and again. Most recently, the Superintendent assured parents that their beloved principal would not be moved – given that their school was just named a California Distinguished School – but then about a month later, waiting until the school year had ended, the District removed the principal, when the informal, word-of-mouth communication network that happens when parents drop-off kids off at school wouldn't be happening. This District is notorious for giving parents the least possible notice of upcoming critical decisions about their children's education. No wonder it's hard to get people involved.

Not just with this school district, but with many government bodies, we often find ourselves translating important documents and public meetings into Spanish and Vietnamese so our members can understand what is happening.

And here, like in many big cities, traditional media sources have made massive cuts in their reporting and editorial staffs, so fewer resources are devoted to local news. One or two reporters for the Mercury News can't possibly, for example, cover effectively education news at all levels of government. We spend an enormous amount of energy just trying to get these critical issues covered and feel bad for the reporters and editors whose jobs must resemble trying to drink from a fire hose. Stories that are important to everyday people are getting missed more often now, despite the relative interest in these issues by local reporters and editors, simply because their beats are just too large.

Again, there's good news: there's a relatively new blog called Teaching In The 408 – an interesting, insightful analysis by a great public school teacher in one of the toughest neighborhoods in San Jose. So if you're very comfortable with the written word, understand lots about public education issues, and can read English at a high level, this blog is a fabulous new source of information.

For a guy like me, as a lone individual in front of a screen, these are the best of times. I could spend all day reading about all sides of any number of public issues that interest me. Despite this truly remarkable explosion in available information, the challenge for our organization, however, continues to be: how to get understandable information into the hands of lots of regular people so they can participate effectively in the public arena. When this happens, I have seen seemingly intractable problems begin to dissolve.