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Arts Education Advocates Save San Diego School Programs

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Last week, a small group of arts education advocates in San Diego successfully appealed to their school board to save the Visual and Performing Arts Department from elimination in a round of aggressive cost cutting. We spoke with activist Victoria J. Saunders to find out what worked and how the group organized their appeal.

ALLIANCE: You and a small group of advocates really made this happen. What is your personal connection to the issue?

VICTORIA: Four of us really led the charge – myself, David Plettner, Patti Saraniero, and Dalouge Smith with the San Diego Regional Arts and Culture Coalition. We were later assisted by a marketing consultant and a political advocacy consultant.

Our concern wasn't motivated by a risk to our own livelihood – except for one, we are all consultants volunteering our time, we weren't part of the school system and none of us were making any money through the VAPA Department. We weren't a group of activist parents, either; only one of us has a child that would have been affected.

I grew up in San Diego Unified and my father was an art teacher. I worked for the city arts commission and now I'm a consultant, providing arts and culture services to non-profits and government arts agencies. We see arts education advocacy as a community responsibility.

ALLIANCE: So tell us how you got started? What was the catalyst?

VICTORIA: I learned that the Visual and Performing Arts Department was on the list of possible eliminations as part of the district's cost cutting process. As soon as I found out what was happening, I called ten people from the local arts community together to sit in my living room and talk about what we could do. We started a Facebook page and planned for an email campaign.

Memorial Day weekend I was on my way out of town and I received an email from the head of the VAPA Department. She had been called in to the superintendent's office to justify her department. A few days later I got a call from someone in the VAPA department who said they had been notified that their department was likely to be eliminated. I got on the phone and called a school board member and she verified that this was likely to happen. So we knew this was for real.

ALLIANCE: You have a background in political science, and you've worked as a consultant in arts for a long time. What skills and experiences did you draw upon to organize a community appeal to save the VAPA Department?

VICTORIA: I've always been fascinated with bureaucracy and government. Trying to navigate what was going on and how to strategize within it made sense to me.

My best skills are in researching. It's so important to get the facts. You can go to the school board website and find out about upcoming meetings and look at the budget. In this case, there was a section describing cost cuts and it said "other options." That's where I saw the proposed elimination of the VAPA Department, which they estimated would save \$3.2 million.

I saw that and I called the head of the VAPA Department and asked, what does that mean? How many teachers are we talking about? How many programs? What is the ultimate impact of that cut?

The VAPA Director gave me a lot of useful information I could use to understand the proposed cuts and the potential impact. We could not have made our case without her and the information she could provide.

ALLIANCE: How did you frame the issue when you started talking to the community?

VICTORIA: It's important to get your message right. I was always careful to frame the issue in terms of keeping the VAPA Department. It wasn't a wholesale elimination of the arts in the schools.

You have to speak the language of the school board. You don't want to say "everything is disappearing," because then the school board can say, no, that's not true. And we would look like we hadn't done our homework.

Then you have to boil it all down to talking points you can share with advocates and tell them exactly what you want them to say. In our case, we wanted them to say: don't eliminate the VAPA Department, and please remove the proposed elimination of the department from your list of cuts.

ALLIANCE: What tools did you use to organize people?

VICTORIA: We knew we needed a website, someplace to house information and a letter writing campaign. So I went into my own website and added a couple of extra pages. (You can see Victoria's web page at <http://victoriajsaunders.com/artseducationadvocacy.aspx>.)

We also created a Facebook fan page to help build community support and share information. Then we combed through our Facebook fans to find out who supported our cause. I discovered that one of our "fans" was the brother of one of the school board members. That was useful information. In some cases, we got in touch with our fans to find out more about why they supported our issue. That helped us understand who we could leverage to help plead our cause.

For example, one of our Facebook fans was a former head of the local taxpayer's association and now he's an independent political consultant. I wrote to him and

asked him about his interest in this issue. He wrote back and said that he has two kids in school, one in the band, and he's always been a supporter of the arts. We had coffee and I asked for his advice. He suggested a media event emphasizing that we needed publicity.

I don't do media. So I asked around for advice. I contacted a colleague who specializes in public relations. We put together a brief for her, and in 48 hours, she helped us pull together a media event. She told us that it is important to have strong visuals. So the VAPA Director helped get kids there - theatre students came in costume; arts students made banners, and musicians brought instruments. The Guild of Puppetry brought some huge puppets, including one Day of the Dead character. The kids hung a sign around his neck that said "Don't Kill the Arts." We got all the local news stations - even someone from the Spanish language station, Univision. One lesson we learned is that we needed a Spanish-speaking advocate at the event, because we needed someone who could speak to the Spanish language reporter in Spanish.

Shortly before the event, I found out we needed a permit and \$2 million in liability insurance. I contacted a sympathetic school board member and she put me in touch with a facilities worker from the school. He contacted all the right people to let them know we were planning a demonstration. One of them contacted the school district's legal department. They said they didn't want to get in our way, and that our demonstration could go forward without the permit or the insurance.

Everybody that we contacted in the district was behind what we wanted to do - nobody wanted to get in our way. Everyone - school officials, police - was cooperative.

The media event was a great success. Ours was the lead story on all the local television stations.

ALLIANCE: What happened at the school board meeting?

VICTORIA: Several advocates spoke to the board. One of the kids in middle school came and said that he wanted to talk about the importance of music in his life and how it helped make him a better math student.

When it came time to vote, the board said they had received our letters and heard our commentary. One said, "I don't want to remove something that's keeping kids from dropping out." You organize all of these talking points, and in the end, you're not really sure which they are going to remember and respond to.

During the meeting of the school board, the board president suggested amending the proposed cut, so that the VAPA funding would be cut by \$1 million. Her argument was that times are tough and everyone needs to take on a fair share of the necessary cuts.

Another school board member who was sympathetic to us disagreed, explaining that the VAPA Department had already taken a hit this year, through the cuts to the state arts and music block grant for arts education. If I had thought of it, I would have added that to my tip sheet of talking points for advocates. Because VAPA had already given up more than \$3 million through cuts to the block grant.

In the end, the board voted 4-to-1 to remove the proposed VAPA cut from the budget.

ALLIANCE: How would you summarize what you learned for other arts education advocates?

VICTORIA: I learned that while you're in the middle of it you can't worry about the end result. You have to be driven by the process and the strategies for achieving your goal. It's important not to over-personalize the issue. We were up against the worst possible odds. But I told myself, if the Visual and Performing Arts Department goes away and I didn't do anything to try to prevent that from happening, I will regret it for the rest of my life. If we lose it and we try at least we know that we tried and that we stood up for something we believe in.

We tried to move away from vigilante thinking. We didn't want to appear to be a bunch of irrational people who didn't understand what the school board was up against. We understood the need to make cuts. But we also knew that of all the things they could eliminate, the \$3.2 million they'd save by eliminating this department was small compared to the \$180 million gap they were facing. And we knew the consequences would be exponential, so we tried to communicate that.

I haven't been on this side of advocacy before. I kept asking people to help me figure out what to do next. Knowing how to ask questions and letting people help you is really important.

I gave up worrying about who was at the table. I could spend time wondering why so-and-so isn't helping. But ultimately, my motto is: whoever is here is who is supposed to be here.

You have to be ready to change your strategy. For example, early on, we talked about doing a morning radio show. That didn't happen. But you have to be ready to change direction and avoid worrying about whether a change of plan is going to affect the end result. You work with what you have.

Note from the Alliance: *Congratulations to Victoria and her fellow arts education advocates in San Diego. For more information about organizing your own local advocacy campaign [visit our advocacy center](http://www.artsed411.org/advocate) online at www.artsed411.org/advocate.*