



## **Friends of Los Altos, Inc. (FOIA)**

A non-profit, non-partisan, volunteer-run organization

### **Ballot Blues**

#### **The County Board of Education: What is it and why do I care?**

So this is part 2 of our series on the upcoming elections. Based on the feedback we have received from a number of you, we are pleased that our analysis is helpful as you think about City Council candidates and issues. Today's edition is all about Santa Clara County Board of Education. The what?? Glad you asked.

What does the County Board of Education do?

So what is the role of the County Board of Education? Like most Los Altos residents, we were largely clueless. Many know that they had a hand in approving the Bullis Charter School way back when, and renewing the charter about 5 years ago, but don't know anything about what they're really responsible for.

The organization itself has responsibility for approving charter schools, running programs to provide training for teachers/administrators, and oversight of the educational activities within the County. The County office also runs its own schools for special education, incarcerated, expelled and migrant students. However the County Board of Education (CBOE) does not exert direct control over individual school districts or charter schools. There are 31 school districts in Santa Clara County and it is the 6<sup>th</sup> largest in the State. There are a total of 20 charter schools in Santa Clara County.

The CBOE board members serve a number of roles in oversight of the organization. There are seven board members and each board member represents a different portion of the geography of Santa Clara County. Our election is for Area 1, which encompasses school districts in Los Altos, Los Altos Hills, Palo Alto, Mountain View, Stanford, and Sunnyvale. The CBOE District Office handles appeals, and provides shared services for payroll, technology and assists in the professional development of staff and teachers. The District also has oversight over charter schools; currently there is only one charter school in area 1- Bullis Charter School; the other one, Summit Denali closed.

Grace Mah, the incumbent, who has held the position since 2006, is running for re-election. Her challenger is Melissa Caswell. In many ways both candidates are similar. Both have strong academic credentials and both have worked in business for a number of years. Grace has been on the CBOE board since her appointment to fill a vacancy in 2007, while Melissa has been on the Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD) board also since 2007. She was appointed to the Santa Clara County School Board's Association in 2017 where she has served as both vice president and president. There is no doubt that both Mah and Caswell are capable of doing the job at the county level. Grace Mah has been in the role at the CBOE for 14 years, but we believe that Melissa Caswell is a fast learner and can hit the ground running if elected.

What is different about the two candidates is their priorities and approach to the position, as well as the groups that are supporting their candidacies. Grace got involved in school issues when she advocated

for a Chinese language immersion program in Palo Alto in the 2003 timeframe. She worked with PAUSD board members to create a program and was able to secure a \$750K/5 year grant from the federal government for the K-12 program. She was subsequently appointed to fill an open position on the Santa Clara CBOE and has won election three times since. Grace's focus is on increased access for children pre-K-8, including universal preschool and greater access to more programs. She has been advocating expansion of the pre-K program by getting more funding from the state.

Mah has been faulted by some Los Altos residents because she voted to continue the charter for the Bullis Charter School (BCS) which some see as an exclusive, quasi-private school within LASD, operating on public funding. Mah points out that in an economic sense, BCS actually has a positive impact on LASD. In order to understand why, we need to take a little detour down school-funding lane.

It turns out that school district funding in California is a complex subject, and it's easy to become confused about who's paying what to whom. Los Altos is called a Basic Aid District. Out of the more than 1000 school districts in California, only about 80 are Basic Aid Districts. What being a Basic Aid District (which is a misleading term) means is that the property tax revenues within the district (i.e., Los Altos and a part of Mountain View) exceed the maximum of what the state would normally provide to the district if the property tax base were lower (that's a nice way of saying that we have lots of very expensive real estate in Los Altos). Thus, being a Basic Aid District, LASD gets to keep all of its property tax-related school funding, but (as of 2003) LASD does not receive any state funding on a per-student basis as do the non-Basic Aid districts; LASD is substantially funded solely by local property tax (and parcel tax) revenues.

Here's the part that has many Los Altos residents upset, and over which there is a great deal of confusion. LASD is required by State law to provide approximately \$8,000 per student per year to BCS, which amounts to roughly \$7.7M per year. Meaning; LASD has \$7.7M less to spend on LASD students because it's required by law to provide that money to fund BCS.

What many Los Altos residents aren't aware of is that even though LASD provides \$7.7M per year out of its budget to BCS, when all the accounting is done, LASD not only spends about \$1,000 *more* per year per student than does BCS, but LASD also pays its teachers a substantially higher average salary than does BCS. Thus, if there were no BCS, and BCS students therefore mostly attended LASD schools, LASD would actually have *less* money to spend per student per year. This is because LASD would have to absorb roughly 1,000 BCS students and only get an increase to the LASD budget by \$7.7M (plus additional revenues totaling another \$1.3M). In other words, independent of what Los Altos residents think of BCS, pro or con, LASD is actually able to spend more per student per year because of the existence of BCS. You can read more about LASD and BCS budgets at:

[https://www.losaltoswomenscaucus.org/PDF/LASD and BCS Understanding the Basics 2 Rev 2.pdf](https://www.losaltoswomenscaucus.org/PDF/LASD%20and%20BCS%20Understanding%20the%20Basics%20Rev%202.pdf).

One last thought on school financing revolves around facilities. The biggest issue with charter school funding is that in land-poor communities such as Los Altos, there is no mechanism to acquire (or pay for) charter school land and facilities. Given that Los Altos has no busing and is based around neighborhood schools, it creates community strife (and, unfortunately, lawsuits) when the requirements for facilities for a charter school necessitate the closure of a local, neighborhood school.

Grace Mah did vote in favor of the BCS charter renewal in 2007, but voted against the renewal in 2011, which, in spite of her negative vote, was ultimately approved—the Board vote was 5-2 in favor of BCS. All of that history being said, it has to be noted that for this election, Mah has received substantial campaign funding from charter school supporters and advocates (see *Daily Post* front page article from September 28). In particular, Kenneth Moore (son of Silicon Valley icon and Intel co-founder Gordon

Moore) who is a BCS co-founder donated \$15,000 to Mah's campaign. Mah also received \$15,000 from the Champions for Education PAC, an organization funded by Walton family (Walmart) and Fischer family (Gap) donations. These two contributions add up to nearly 50% of Mah's fund raising to date and it is our understanding another \$75,000 may have been contributed in the last few days. It seems clear that if we use the "follow the money" rule that Grace Mah is the favored candidate for those who wish for continued Santa Clara CBOE support for charter schools within the district, and in particular, the Bullis Charter School in Los Altos.

Melissa Caswell got involved with the Palo Alto school system through her work on the PTA which ultimately led to her running for a seat on the school board. She had been focused on school issues, more recently in her county-wide role focusing on issues common to all the school districts-best practices etc. In running for the Santa Clara CBOE, Melissa has been focusing on the challenges that districts face in a pandemic and post pandemic environment. She wants the CBOE to take the lead in sharing best practices for distance learning, mental health, and guidelines on reopening, and if necessary a partial or complete closedown of schools if students, staff or teachers are infected.

Caswell has stated that her prior work with school boards in the County has been well received. Her current endorsements would support that claim-there are 6 school districts in the area totaling 30 board members-to date 27 of them have endorsed Melissa. Furthermore 6 out of the 7 Palo Alto City Council members have endorsed her as well. In addition to endorsement support for Caswell, local education and government officials from Palo Alto have made substantial donations to Caswell's campaign. Steve Brown from Los Altos Hills, who opposes charter schools such as Bullis, gave Caswell \$10,000. Outreach Circle, a software organization in Los Altos that supports driving change through efficient use of donated funding provided another \$10,000 to her campaign. These donations are in addition to multiple smaller donations from members of the PAUSD Board and Palo Alto City Council members. All of this suggests to us that for those who know Melissa, they feel her priorities are well aligned to the needs of the local school districts. We find that pretty compelling.

So the choice is between two extremely well-qualified individuals, both of whom have served our schools for many years and have the best interests of students at heart.

Grace Mah is obviously very familiar with the operation and organization of the Santa Clara CBOE and its districts. She is focused on making incremental improvements to what she feels are successful existing programs. Grace has a wealth of knowledge of the County's educational issues and is well connected to all of the political and educational entities that make the district run. She has a number of supporters throughout the County, though she has more supporters among government leaders than those associated with the schools in district. She has also received substantial support from organizations that favor charter schools.

Melissa Caswell is focused on helping schools to be successful during the pandemic and beyond by employing best practices, better organization, and better communication both among districts in the County's jurisdiction as well as districts outside the County. She believes there is a lot the Santa Clara CBOE can learn from other California districts and believes that cooperation between our County and others in the Bay Area could bring economies of scale to operational costs of running the schools. She has financial support from unions (Plumbers, Steamfitters and Refrigeration Fitters Union Local 393 PAC as well as the Sheet Metal Workers International Association Local 104 PAC and Cement Masons Local 400 PAC), school boards within the district, Palo Alto City Council members, and individuals who do not favor charter schools.

Our take is that we think a new face with new ideas would help the County Board be more relevant for local districts like Los Altos, regardless of your view of charter schools. So for us the math is simple and it adds up to Melissa Caswell for the County Board of Education.

**Friends of Los Altos**

Los Altos, CA 94022 & 94024

<https://friendsoflosaltos.org>