

Layoffs Hit Renowned L.A. Music Magnet, *Times* Reporter Blames Republicans

Posted By [Alexander Marlow](#) On April 1, 2011 @ 4:59 am In [Featured Story](#), [Media Criticism](#), [Politics](#) | [14 Comments](#)

About three miles south of Beverly Hills in the upper-middle class neighborhood of Beverlywood is Hamilton High School. An otherwise ordinary Los Angeles Unified School District-sponsored juvenile detention center, Hamilton is home to a couple of well regarded magnet programs, particularly the Academy of Music Magnet. The Music Magnet is [the old stomping grounds](#) ^[1] of pop stars, Broadway talent, and even Hollywood A-listers who were drawn to a public school program that has a focus on the arts. Yet, even this rare LAUSD high school that students actually want to attend has become a casualty of the horrendous budget crises in the state of California.

Reporter Steve Lopez was dispatched to the scene to [write up](#) ^[2] the various cutbacks for the *Los Angeles Times*. Lopez is known for being the journalist whose [articles on a schizophrenic musician inspired](#) ^[3] the Robert Downey Jr./Jaime Foxx film *The Soloist*. Then all of a sudden, what had the makings of a compelling human interest piece on one of the handful of quintessentially Hollywood high schools quickly devolved into a sob story about how these poor teachers and students have been victimized by the dastardly Republicans and their resistance to tax hikes.

How did he do this?

First, Lopez paints a rosy picture of the school by glowingly describing a performance by the jazz band and cherry-picking quotes raving about teachers; his portrayal of Hamilton is a lot like Sean Penn's depiction of Iraq in *Team America*:

As it happens, Hamilton is my local high school and I have family and friends who have graduated from the Music Magnet in recent years. To put it bluntly, many of their experiences didn't resemble the mythical land of incredible teachers and students anxious to learn that Lopez describes. An anonymous Hamilton graduate told me she recalls students doing cocaine in the state-of-the-art auditorium (which was overhauled with a [lavish grant](#) ^[4] to the Music Magnet)—in fact, the source recalled students showing up to class on an assortment of drugs. Faculty members were seen "celebrating" with students at cast parties after plays.

And I thought programs like these were meant to keep kids off drugs.

The better students still spent a large portion of class time listening to their ipods.

Not surprisingly for an arts magnet—or any school, for that matter—there have been allegations of political propagandizing by the Music Magnet teachers, both within and out of the context of the course material. Among other examples, one of the choral teachers introduced the class to an ode to George W. Bush called "[THE DOOFUS MARCHES ON: Battle Hymn of the Republicans](#).^[5]" The chorus:

Glory! Glory! How he'll Screw Ya!

Glory! Glory! What's It To Ya!

Glory! Glory! How he'll Screw Ya!T

This Doofus marches on.

I'm not sure what's more on the nose: the indoctrination or the humor.

One of these *spectacular* teachers Lopez mentions in the article taught an acting class; an anonymous source sums up the class experience this way: "She taught me nothing about

acting but a lot about AIDS." Another teacher mentioned in the article, according to an alum, "pushed an anti-Bush agenda" and openly discussed his alcohol abuse with the students during class time.

These examples are from the highly touted Music Magnet; I have even more frightening anecdotes from the main school.

But the stuff that doesn't make Hamilton High seem awesomely awesome didn't make it into Lopez's piece. What did slip past the editors, however, was a four paragraph tirade against Republicans:

But during tough times, even [GOP](#) ^[6] hero [Ronald Reagan](#) ^[7] and rock-solid conservative Gov. [Pete Wilson](#) ^[8] temporarily raised taxes along with making tough cuts. Today, California's Republican legislators have so far refused to support Gov. Brown's plan to let voters decide whether they want to go that same route: to balance the budget half with cuts and half by temporarily extending tax increases.

Nor have the Republicans explained how they'd whack \$26 billion without putting more teachers out of work and destroying schools in their own districts. And where, by the way, are the parents in those districts? Are they going to watch in silence as their kids get hammered?

At Hamilton, booster club president Chris Kenemuth told me she's a Republican who doesn't mind paying taxes to save great programs. She's been trying to contact Republican legislators to let them know how she feels, but they're not responding.

Of course not. What can they say that doesn't shame them further? And how would they explain who wins when you fire teachers and demoralize students; when you take something that works and destroy it?

If this is Mr. Lopez's honest analysis of what ails L.A. city schools, maybe he's been spending too much time in the auditorium partaking in the aforementioned extracurricular activities with the jazz band... and various faculty members.

One of reasons we're in this mess is because tax rates are already so damn high in this state (not to mention in the city of Los Angeles) that businesses are leaving in droves and taking their jobs, and potential tax revenue, with them. So what should we do? According to Lopez, raise 'em up some more so that LAUSD, which boasts about [a 40% graduation](#) ^[9] rate, can continue to phone it in for our kids. What's incredible about this number is that LAUSD *wants* to move students along; show up and complete most of the course work, and they're good to go. This is apparently a tall order for most families. To be fair, the Hamilton Music Magnet has an exceptional graduation rate, but doesn't that say more about the already motivated students and parents than it does about the effectiveness of the program?

The CATO Institute [published a report](#) ^[10] last years estimating that each student in Los Angeles Unified cost tax payers over \$25,000 per year for fiscal year 2008. You read that right. Given the graduation rate, that's over \$62,500 per year per graduate. LAUSD itself only cops to shelling out about \$10k, but even that's still more than the average private school tuition for the L.A. area (here's [an article](#) ^[11] that explains the discrepancy between the reported and actual cost). But again, if you're a liberal, there is no price too high for our kids to have a public school environment to ~~do drugs hate Bush~~ learn jazz trumpet.

Lopez asks, "and as for those teachers who remain, will their class sizes shoot past the 40s and into the 50s?" He should be asking, given all the money spent, why are they already in the 40s?

In the eyes of Lopez, the liberals and Democrats who have run California and the City of Angels for the last generation are free from blame, and same goes for the unions that have put America's public school-going children at the mercy of a system without incentives that's designed to protect the bad teachers at the expense of the students and good teacher... I mean *teachers*.

If any public school could be exemplary in Los Angeles, it'd be Hamilton, but not even the

most talented kids, the "magnet" status, or the occasional generous donation could make this program a clear success.

Of the Hamilton High School alumni I know, many seemed to have a rich and educational experience, others had their time and your money wasted, and most fell somewhere in between. Personally, I took music every year of school starting from sixth grade up until I received a minor in music from UC Berkeley, so I am all for including music as part of formal education and Hamilton may well be the best we can do at this point in time. Still, many who have taken that journey through Hamilton High School Music Magnet and the people close to them know that it's not at all the picture of perfection described in Steve Lopez's one-sided report. And the GOP okaying a mid-recession tax hike isn't going to change that.

But this Hollywood and it's the *L.A. Times*, and I do love a good fantasy.



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URLs in this post:

[1] the old stomping grounds:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Hamilton_High_School_%28Los_Angeles%29

[2] write up: <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/me-la-0316-lopez-savinghamilton-20110315,1,5035946.column?page=1>

[3] articles on a schizophrenic musician inspired:

<http://www.latimes.com/news/columnists/la-columnist-slopez,1,6563358,bio.columnist>

[4] lavish grant: <http://www.hamiltonmusic.org/about/history.jsp>

[5] THE DOOFUS MARCHES ON: Battle Hymn of the Republicans.:

http://www.artsjournal.com/herman/2005/11/the_doofus_marches_on.html

[6] GOP: <http://www.latimes.com/topic/politics/parties-movements/republican-party-ORGOV000004.topic>

[7] Ronald Reagan: <http://www.latimes.com/topic/politics/government/presidents-of-the-united-states/ronald-reagan-PEPLT005429.topic>

[8] Pete Wilson: <http://www.latimes.com/topic/arts-culture/pete-wilson-PEHST002128.topic>

[9] a 40% graduation: http://www.sacbee.com/2010/06/27/2852029/dan-walters-high-school-graduation.html#mi_rss=Dan%20Walters

[10] published a report: <http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa662.pdf>

[11] an article: http://articles.oregister.com/2010-07-28/opinion/24634274_1_spending-public-education-school-districts

[12] Image: #

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