

Cities should invest in local schools

By PETER DREIER

PASADENA'S mayor and the City Council are now talking about getting more involved in our public schools. Some are even talking about having the mayor and council appoint at least one member to the Pasadena Unified School District board.

It is good to know that these public officials are finally taking an interest in the public schools.

I am not a knee-jerk defender of PUSD. In fact, I have been quite critical of board and the administration, especially the constant squabbling among board members and the top administration's failure to provide parents and the public with adequate information and explanation of its actions.

I wish PUSD had more resources to add foreign language instruction in elementary school; to expand physical education and sports and to improve the condition of its athletic fields; to strengthen its music and art programs; and to provide quality after-school programs for every student who needs it.

And I wish PUSD paid its teachers more or had more teachers and smaller class sizes, particularly in middle and high schools.

We recognize that, like all public school systems, especially those that serve many low-income students and students whose parents are not English-speakers, PUSD has many challenges to face.

Against enormous odds, PUSD has made steady progress in test scores. PUSD's intervention programs — such as the program to provide reading coaches to seventh- and ninth-grade students with low reading scores — have had a real, positive impact.

There are plenty of success stories in PUSD — including high school graduates attending first-rate universities, and outstanding programs at all grade levels.

But the biggest problem facing PUSD is its declining enrollment, which translates into less funding from the state, and has led to a serious budget crunch.

The state's formula for distributing funds to public school districts compounds this tragedy.

Many affluent school districts get more dollars-per-student than those, like PUSD, with many low-income students.

Why does Beverly Hills get more dollars-per-student than PUSD?

GUEST VIEW

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PUSD is not alone in facing declining enrollment. More than half the school districts in the state now face a similar trend.

The Glendale and Hacienda La Puente school districts have been steadily losing enrollment and face serious budget shortfalls (as does the Garvey school district).

Declining enrollment is due primarily to the high cost of housing, not the failure of the public schools. The vast majority of families that are leaving PUSD, as well as many other school districts, are not leaving voluntarily. They are leaving because they are being pushed out by gentrification.

It isn't mostly middle-class homeowners who are leaving PUSD but poor and working class families who can't afford the skyrocketing cost of rents. The high cost of housing is not PUSD's responsibility — it is the city government's responsibility — and on that front, the city has failed miserably.

Almost all the housing recently built, under construction, and in the pipeline in Pasadena is market-rate housing.

This has a ripple effect on the rest of the city's housing stock, with skyrocketing rents and escalating home prices.

Many of the families being pushed out of Pasadena are families with kids, while many of the families living in the new market-rate housing are families without kids.

There are many tools at the city's disposal to protect and expand the sup-

ply of affordable housing for working families — nurses, teachers, janitors, waiters, retail clerks, city employees and similar workers. But the city has failed to use these tools.

So much of the fault for PUSD's declining enrollment, and its serious budget problems, must be laid at the city government's door. The mayor and City Council need to accept responsibility for this rather than point fingers at the school district.

A stronger city role in education? Fine. PUSD's families and kids need all the allies they can get.

But they should put their money where their mouths are and invest in their public schools.

For example, Santa Monica, which has a much smaller school district, contributes more than \$6 million a year directly to its public schools.

Other city governments help pay for the school district's utility bills or provide after-school programs that help improve students' academic performance, or absorb the cost of school librarians.

Why not put money in programs that improve academic performance — like the math and reading coaches.

When it comes to spending the city's discretionary funds for our kids and our schools, the city is pretty much "missing in action."

Perhaps empty schools can be turned into mixed-income housing sites for working families.

Why doesn't the City Council commit to direct its housing trust-fund money into these sites to guarantee that the housing built there will be affordable to working families?

The mayor and City Council are setting up a "blue ribbon" task force to discuss how to address the public schools. A permanent standing committee on schools might be a stronger show of commitment, but this is a start.

Most people are aware of the African saying, "It takes a village to raise a child." Whether our city officials recognize it or not, the city government is part of that village.

So let's not have a custody battle over who controls our public school students. The mayor and City Council should start acting like responsible public officials who care about, and are accountable to, the families whose kids attend our public schools.

Peter Dreier lives in Pasadena, has two children in public school and teaches political science at Occidental College.