



TUESDAY | December 11, 2007

THE BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE:

LAUSD Needs Dramatic Reform to Succeed



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The Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce is the voice of business in L.A. County. Founded in 1888, the Chamber promotes a prosperous economy and quality of life in the Los Angeles region. For more information, visit www.lachamber.org

350 S. Bixel St.
Los Angeles, CA 90017
213.580.7500 tel
213.580.7511 fax
info@lachamber.org

Angelenos may disagree on many issues, but we all agree on the need to dramatically reform our public K-12 education system.

Today, 309 Los Angeles Unified School District schools fall into the program improvement category and 34 middle and high schools are ranked as low performing by the State Board of Education. Ninety-five of those schools have been in the program improvement category for more than five years.

There is no doubt; we have collectively failed these children. For too long we have allowed kids to languish in low-performing schools. The lack of educational achievement often traps children into a life of poverty as adults. We can do better. A bold vision coupled with equally aggressive strategies tied to established benchmarks, strong accountability and appropriate resources is needed to get the best results.

To that end, LAUSD Superintendent David Brewer has introduced the High Priorities Strategic Plan, which aims to take on 34 of LAUSD's lowest performing schools where nearly a majority of the 98,000 students attending these schools scored far below or below basic on the California Standards Test in the 2006-2007 school year.

The Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce and the United Way of Greater Los Angeles attended the school board meeting today to applaud four components of Superintendent Brewer's plan: his sense of urgency, his focus on the lowest performing schools, his desire to engage parents honestly and respectfully, and his recommendation to use incentive compensation to reward teachers and administrators for student success.

We also told the school board that we do not think the plan as currently written is bold enough. The Chamber and the United Way recommended four additional elements which we would like to see in the plan as it moves forward:

- Accountability measures at all levels must be clearly defined, publicly stated and reviewed on a regular basis.
- The superintendent, board and United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) should utilize a flexible model like the "thin contract" designed for the Belmont Zone of Choice to ensure that teachers and administrators have the flexibility (i.e. increased local site control over budgets, staffing, instruction, curriculum and use of time) to make the significant changes necessary to be successful.
- The superintendent and board should seize the opportunity to reengineer and dramatically streamline central management to reallocate significant resources to schools and classrooms in order to sustain these improvements and expand these strategies to other schools.
- The superintendent and board, with input from teachers and administrators, should set clear benchmarks and firm timelines with specific measurable targets for the next three, six, and 12 months to reflect the sense of urgency and seriousness stated in the plan.

The United Way and the Chamber are encouraged by emerging examples of successful small school models like the New Tech High School housed within Jefferson High School and some of the charter schools operated by Green Dot and the Alliance for College Ready Schools. These examples demonstrate that huge gains in student achievement are possible in the most challenging neighborhoods when steps are taken like those recommended above.

To make real and lasting change at LAUSD will require building a powerfully shared agenda. This isn't easy and will require difficult decisions. The Chamber and the United Way pledge our collective support to LAUSD and urge the district to move forward with the kind of boldness and innovation that will clearly indicate to our community that we will no longer tolerate business as usual in our schools. Our students and community can no longer afford the cost of failure.

And that's the Business Perspective.

Gary Toebben

by Gary Toebben, President & CEO, Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce

L.A. Business THIS WEEK

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Gary L. Toebben
President & CEO
Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce

*The Business Perspective is a weekly opinion piece by Gary Toebben,
President & CEO of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce,
produced with the input of Senior Policy Advisor Rusty Hammer.*

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