Education as a Strategic Priority

Overview

After our many attempts at mining the survey data, all the way back to the first Strategic Plan, the importance of our schools within our community is almost second-to-none. However, neither of the previous Plans has adequately represented that. This discrepancy lead us to interview over a dozen executives and administrators from the City, the School District and the School Board. We then looked into how cities and school districts can work together to improve the lives of their youth and their communities as a whole. We have concluded that the Strategic Plan committee should consider Youth and Education as a strategic priority.

Mining the Survey Data for Schools and Education

1996

- "Schools" was #1 in the **"Top 10 Strengths of the City"** by the focus groups
- "Quality of Education/Schools" was #3 in **"Top Ranked Issues to Focus on"**

1998

From the telephone survey of residents and the issue of "**Resident Needs Not Being Met"**, the "most serious issue" was the "Quality of the Schools/Education System".

1999

From the Strategic Plan's introductory information in the "**Personal Growth and Enrichment of the Individual**" Priority… "A recurring theme through all of the different data collection methods is the school system. The quality of the educational system is rated #2 'liked best' by the focus group participants while the physical condition of the school facilities rated #2 'least liked' or 'improvement needed' categories. School funding ranked #5 in 'least liked.'"

- One sub-goal out of the thirteen in the "Communication and Civic Involvement" priority referred to "collaboration and interface between the educational community, the public and local government"
- Two sub-goals out of the twenty three in the "Economic Development" priority referred to "Business/education partnerships…" for school-to-career and for youth employment opportunities.
- One sub-goal out of the nineteen in the "Personal Growth and Enrichment…" priority referred to "collaboration between the district, the city and local businesses"
- One sub-goal out of the twenty-six in the "Safe and Secure Community" priority referred to "Safe schools".

Note: All of these sub-goals were carry-overs from the 1996 plan.

2008

From the telephone survey of Residents' Top Suggestions for Improving City Services" (open-ended question), the survey reported the top 3% responses. "Education Improvement/more/better schools" is 10th on the list.

Community Focus Groups:

Name	Issue	Status	Place
Commission Group	Schools	Like Best	2nd
HOA Group	Torrance Schools	Like Best	3rd
	Aging Schools	Like Least	2nd
	Improve school finances	Future Dir.	2nd
Service Group	Education	Like Best	1st
	School funding/deteriorated schools	Like Least	2nd
Seniors	Create a youth program for career training & education	Future Dir.	3rd
Religious	Schools/PTAs	Like Best	1st
Education	Good Schools	Like Best	1st
	Lack of support for bonds	Like Least	1st
	Poor school facilities	Like Least	2nd
	Lack of affordable housing	Like Least	3rd
	Strengthen their relationship with the city	Future	1st
	Modernize for the 21st century	Future	2nd
Small business	Quality of schools	Like Best	2nd
	5&10 year plan to improve the education system	Future	1st
	Aggressive partnership between the city, businesses and State to support schools	Future	3rd
Youth	Bad school maintenance	Like Least	3rd
	City needs to do more for schools	Future	3rd
Employees	Remodel schools	Like Least	2nd

Our committee's SWOT analysis of the City ranked:

- Strengths -- #1 Good/Strong Schools
- Weaknesses -- #1 Poor Condition of Schools
- Opportunities to Pursue -- #2 Pass Bond (after the cool city/green initiative)

The five historical school-related sub goals don't begin to reflect the consistent survey data that demonstrates how our schools and our educational system are of high importance to the Torrance Community.

The Current State of the City and School District Collaboration and Communication

Todd interviewed people from both the City and the District, including:

City	District
Mayor Frank Scotto Councilman Paul Nowatka Councilman Bill Sutherland Councilman Tom Brewer Councilman Gene Barnett City Manager LeRoy Jackson Director of Finance Eric Tsao Former Mayor Dee Hardison	Superintendent George Mannon Deputy Superintendent Don Stabler School Board President Michael Ernst School Board Trustee Al Muratsuchi School Board Trustee Terry Ragins School Board Trustee Don Lee School Board Trustee Mark Steffen Former School Board Trustee Beth Wilson Torrance Education Foundation President, Patrick Furey

We learned that while the City currently supports the District in a wide variety of ways (support in fiscal year 2008, ending in June, totals close to $3,000,000) there is poor communication and some amount of negativity between the two groups. Consequently, opportunities to collaborate continue to go unfilled while an institutionalized "distance" has continued on for decades, through countless changes of personnel at the executive levels at the City, the District and the Board of Education.

Why Must They Get Along?

In researching the issues of city and district relations and partnerships in general, we developed a broader vision of what's possible in city/school district collaborations, as well as what's at stake here. For example, at our meeting Monday night when we talked about the Economic priority, and the value of the city collaborating with TUSD, the county and probably others for the sake of vocational training, became readily apparent. Collaborating in other areas might involve:

- Lawn maintenance duties
- Bus maintenance
- Joint use of buildings
- Excess school property development
- Partnerships in after-school care
- More community involvement in "whole child" development

Some initiatives would be pursued to help TUSD's finances. As the financial picture for the state's school districts appears to be pretty dismal for the foreseeable future, concern over TUSD's finances is very justified. Recent articles in the Daily Breeze and LA Times

have highlighted the challenges that other districts are facing. Other initiatives would be more focused on the education and development of the city's children and youth.

Of course, all this requires an effective, working relationship between the various levels of the city, the school district and the school board. However, the general attitude throughout the city and as reflected by our group's discussions is "the city can't do anything for the district". In general, and throughout most cities and school districts, that seems to be the status quo. However, we have talked to other districts and cities that are collaborating in a variety of way. There is also information from the *National League of Cities,* in the form of a publication titled "Improving Public Schools -- Action Kit For Municipal Leaders" that states:

> The quality of public schools and the long-term prospects of cities – almost every local elected official knows that these two things are closely linked. The connection is based in part on the central role that schools play in building stable communities and shaping residents' perceptions of the quality of community life. Municipal leaders also understand that a strong public education system is a great asset as their cities compete for new jobs and industries. An NLC survey found that local officials view improvements in the quality of elementary and secondary education as one of the three most effective strategies for promoting local economic development and reducing poverty.
>
> No school district by itself can do all that needs to be done to improve our public schools. Good schools are the shared responsibility of many partners: school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, families, community and faith-based organizations, cultural institutions, business leaders, and elected officials at all levels of government. Francis Keppel, former U.S. Commissioner of Education, put it succinctly: *"Education is too important to be left solely to the educators."*
>
> Mayors and city councilmembers are essential partners in improving public schools, and they can play key roles even when they have no direct authority over local school districts.

Note: A summary of the NLC's collaboration advice to cities is contained in one of the companion documents. A link to NLC's complete advice is at the end of this document.

Connie Busse, the Executive Director of the CCS Partnership -- a joint effort of the League of California Cities, the California State Association of Counties and the California School Boards Association, repeated this vision. *The Partnership promotes the development of public policies that build and preserve communities by encouraging local collaborative efforts among California's cities, counties, school boards and district.*

Ms. Busse said that, although the distant relationship that our City and District has is not unusual, a number of California communities, both large and small, have produced impressive results through collaboration. Their web site at: www.ccspartnership.org has case studies of many cities and districts that are accomplishing a lot by working together.

Note: A summary of CCS' collaboration advice is contained in one of the companion documents.

Education and the Strategic Plan

In speaking with LeRoy Jackson, we learned that prior Strategic Plan committees set aside any discussion about schools, due to more pressing city issues at that time. He believes that the Plan now should promote ways the city can work with the district, without the city imposing its will on the district. We talked about various ways that the city currently supports and interacts with the district, including:

- Crossing guards and SRO officers at the schools
- Promoting safety through CPR training, sober grad night education, etc.
- As a community, the schools are used by Boy and Girl Scouts, AYSO, HOA's
- Various sports leagues use the schools' fields and gymnasiums
- Supporting youth library services

He mentioned how the schools are "like factories that shut down at night, with most not even having any security lighting". He suggested that for schools to become more neighborhood resources, they could promote adult education classes that are of interest to their neighborhood.

Mr. Jackson stated that as the schools are part of the community's fabric and the city should work to promote them as it does with economic development, etc. He suggested that maybe we bring the schools into the Plan by focusing on youth issues. He also mentioned that by promoting bus service to middle school kids, maybe they'd be more inclined to ride the bus in high school, etc. which would help develop a more mass transit oriented attitude throughout the city. (Transit issue)

Conclusion

Through the many surveys of the residents and focus group since 1995, the importance of our schools in our community cannot be overstated. In contrast, the representation of schools and education in the Strategic Plan is almost non-existent.

Through our evaluation of current city/district attitudes and collaboration plans, as well as our research into the achievements that are possible through a community-wide approach to education, we believe that our committee has a duty to our community to update the Strategic Plan with a new focus on Youth and Education.

Todd Hays	Michael Wermers

Information Resources

Coalition for Community Schools

A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone – all day, every day, evenings and weekends. Using public schools as hubs, community schools bring together many partners to offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families and communities.

http://www.communityschools.org/index.php

Some good lists of ideas:

CCS Partnership

Collaborative Practices

http://www.ccspartnership.org/T_collaborativeP.cfm

A good brochure that provides more explanations and examples of community schools:

http://www.communityschools.org/CCSDocuments/partnershipsforexcellence.pdf

National League of Cities

Improving Public Schools Action Kit For Municipal Leaders

http://www.nlc.org/ASSETS/DE754D45E9AC4A5198A306F2F00E0023/Improving%20PS%20Action%20Kit.pdf

Stronger Schools – Stronger Cities

Report from the *National League of Cities* and *the Institute for Youth, Education and Families*

http://www.nlc.org/ASSETS/E28C6B537E7C4D7D84B74CB2D95175C8/IYEF_Stronger_Cities.pdf