

PASADENA STAR-NEWS OPINION

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Volunteers help stressed schools

By Sherri Rottenbacher

CRASH, cut, slash, and crisis — all words we hear too often on the nightly news. Words like bailout, buyout and rescue might be reassuring, but not when combined with \$700 billion of federal taxpayer money.

California, too, has busted its budget, and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is calling for between \$2 billion and \$4.5 billion in cuts to education alone. This slash threatens an already pared budget in the middle of the school year. Parents march on the capital and teachers protest with teach-ins, but the blade is running and the cuts keep coming.

What now?

The quality of education our students receive is often maligned and the cost bemoaned, but a viable solution lies unused right in our neighborhoods: volunteers — you, me, all of us, and a little bit of time. Volunteer programs offer benefits beyond their cost to students, schools, and the volunteers themselves.

This fall I am volunteering for a reading program, Reading Partners, to fulfill an assignment for a college class in education theory. I am enthused by the progress students make in just an hour or two of time reading with an adult each week.

After 30 hours, students' reading skills often advance one grade level. The kids benefit with a year of progress in 15 weeks, which improves their ability to learn all day long every day.

Wow! Time is a cost, but spending time learning pays for a lifetime.

GUEST VIEW

What does a volunteer reading program cost schools and what kind of return can they expect?

A volunteer program costs them a room and scheduling students reading times on campus with volunteers from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. This means volunteers must pull students out of class or daycare, which is inconvenient for teachers until an acceptable schedule is established.

Schools with a Reading Partners Program often triple their Academic Performance Index (API) targets. That tripling means extra federal funds for Title I schools, not to mention a student body more prepared to learn.

It is time for struggling schools to employ volunteer programs bolstering stripped budgets by improving test scores that qualify those schools for existing federal funds. Title I schools are the most challenged schools in the poorest neighborhoods.

Why volunteer? Money is tight and time is money. Is it give and no gift for volunteers? It will cost each volunteer one to two hours a week and the energy it takes to read a book and ask and answer a few questions. At Reading Partners the program provides any necessary training. The program also provides supervision and onsite help.

Traditionally, schools have looked to parents who have a clear reason to volunteer, but I am not suggesting mothers put in another two hours at

their child's school. Schools need more volunteers to staff these programs making it necessary to recruit from the community. Schools can recruit high school and college students, employees from local companies and retirees. High school students benefit by accumulating community service hours required for graduation and college students improve their resumes. All students benefit by stretching their communication skills.

Companies and employees can claim community spirit without spending a dime. Retirees receive a benefit by volunteering because it is a healthier practice than exercising four days a week.

A study performed at the Buck Institute for Age Research in Novato also found that people who volunteer with two or more organizations have a 44 percent lower chance of dying prematurely. We will all die one day, but living a healthy life of volunteering happily postpones the inevitable.

Volunteer programs can help our schools survive the crisis of cut and slash in the economic crash. Improved budgets for struggling schools due to higher test scores, advancing reading skills for students, an inspired community spirit, and enhanced health for volunteers are real benefits of volunteer programs.

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