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Great schools as an economic development tool

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One of the greatest single influences on land use is public elementary and middle schools. Communities that have great public schools have great investments in real estate. High performing schools attract families to buy or rent homes. Those residents support local retail. These communities also become attractive locations for business, because the decision makers of those businesses want their employees to have short commute times to work. All this occurs despite the fact that only about one quarter of all households have school-aged children living at home.

Local leaders repeatedly ask how they can spur investment in their communities. They may hear that better planning, infrastructure improvements and street beautification are the key. But we argue that the one sure way would be to focus on making their schools great.

This is proven out time and again if we look at master planned communities across the country. A selling feature is always new schools with good test scores. The San Diego region is home to some of the best and worst performing schools in our state. We also have one of the highest concentrations of universities compared to our population size. Further up the "food chain," our local life and high-tech industries boast one of the highest concentrations of Nobel laureates of any region on the globe.

Unfortunately, we also live amid the backdrop of devastating state budget cutbacks and severe rancor among the San Diego Unified District stakeholders, the second-largest K-12 public school system in the state. Our governor and legislature have decided that cutting school funding is an easy way to balance our terribly out-of-whack budget. For grades K-12 this creates terrible budget shortfalls. For higher education, college and university administrators are forced to raise tuition costs, which inevitably denies more qualified students from finishing degrees. While we can debate if either the state or local school districts spend money wisely, that is simply a diversion from the pressing reality.

Looking at school performance scores, San Diego County simply has too many students performing below grade level or not finishing school at all. The picture is even worse for minority students. This is simply not acceptable. The state of California is in the running for a \$700 million "Race to the Top" education grant the Federal Government. If we could secure this it would be a step in the right direction.

While every now and then we hear of an eighth grade dropout who becomes a successful entrepreneur or a Bill Gates who drops out of college, these are one in a million flukes. The engine that supports, and will continue to support our economy is an educated work force. This fact is most certainly not lost on nations like China and India. Yet, the United States continues to slip behind other nations in educating our youth.

Recently a group of concerned citizens working with the University of San Diego published their findings on the performance of San Diego Unified School District. This group, calling themselves San Diegans 4 Great Schools, evaluated the test scores and funding of local schools. The results were disappointing.

However, even more disappointing was the reaction they received after their July 20 press conference. Even before the ink was dry on their report the gadflies were decrying their findings. Most notably Bernie Rhinerson of the District, Sheila Jackson, a Trustee, and Camille Zamboro of the Teachers Union stated that test scores need to "take in account more than \$400 million in budget cuts that the district has made in over a four-year period." True, these cuts are devastating and it is unconscionable the state has done this, but it is time for everyone to stop acting like a victim. Cut or no cut, if you are a student and your test scores are subpar, your future is in jeopardy. Cut or no cut, if you are an employer you will find another candidate to fill that job. Cut or no cut, if you are looking to locate a business you will do so where the work force is educated -- and that may be in Bangalore, not Bay Park.

Further, the focus must be on students and only students. Recently of about 1,000 new, untenured teachers, all were rehired. In other words, the District determined that 100 percent of teacher candidates seeking tenure were fully qualified. That is an amazing statistic. I know of no other hiring manager with this success rate. But I do know that far less than 100 percent of students are fully qualified to graduate.

It is now time to accept the regrettable budget situation and realize we do not have time to argue. A multi-year

debate condemns the opportunity of a proper education for our current students. One can agree or disagree with what San Diegans 4 Great Schools may say, but the fact is that the ship is taking on water -- and fast. Anyone willing to bail water or pull on an oar must be commended. Regardless of whether one has children or not, our future is our youth and an educated youth translates into a thriving economy, job growth and real estate development. It is imperative that we invest in a singular goal -- a great education for all.

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