

# Los Angeles Times

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-partnership1-2008jul01,0,4672728.story>

From the Los Angeles Times

## Villaraigosa and his partners set for school to start

Two year-round campuses open today as part of his scaled-down reform effort.

By Howard Blume

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July 1, 2008

The termites among the bookshelves in her classroom at 99th Street Elementary did it for Janet Lee.

When the third-grade teacher alerted authorities at the South Los Angeles campus, "the note I got back was: 'The termite exterminator came yesterday,' as if that would somehow solve my problem," Lee said. "What do I do to get that situation taken care of if I've already notified the proper people?"

That sort of frustration led Lee and other teachers at 10 schools to vote themselves out of everyday control by the Los Angeles Unified School District and turn instead to Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's school-reform effort. The mayor's group, the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, is the scaled-down result of his once-sweeping plan to take control of the nation's second-largest school system.

Classes began today at the mayor's year-round high schools, Roosevelt in Boyle Heights and the Santee Education Complex, south of downtown.

This experiment, which takes place at some of the district's lowest-performing schools, has a mandate to help more than 18,000 students. The vast majority of them perform below grade level; more than half are destined to drop out before graduation.

But starting today, each ninth-grader will enroll in a college-prep curriculum, and students who can't keep pace are supposed to get extra support during and after school.

Leaders of United Teachers Los Angeles, the teachers union, also have much at stake. They want to demonstrate that massive school improvement can happen when teachers share authority with administrators and without the dismantling of complex, restrictive labor agreements.

The path was cleared for the partnership when Villaraigosa's fundraising helped elect a majority of allied school-board candidates, who took office a year ago.

Since then, 10 schools voted to join with the mayor; six spurned the idea.

Many characterized their votes for the partnership as, essentially, a rejection of L.A. Unified.

"What are we getting ourselves into? We don't know," Lee said. "But I decided, 'Let's jump off this ship.' "

Jumping ship is likely to mean more money. Through philanthropy, the partnership plans to increase spending at those schools by about 5%. It's also negotiating with L.A. Unified for more control of dollars that are managed at the district's downtown headquarters. That adds up to as much as \$1 million, depending on the school. The partnership envisions each teacher with a personal computer and high-tech projection equipment for every classroom.

Fundraising for the partnership has lagged, however, as gangs and gridlock have risen on the mayor's agenda, even as he focused more time on raising money for his reelection campaign. Attracting donors suffered another blow when Deputy Mayor Ramon C. Cortines, who is respected nationally, left the mayor's team for the No. 2 job at L.A. Unified. By its own accounting, the mayor's nonprofit needs to raise about \$6 million this year and \$46.7 million over the next three years.

Lee recently attended a three-day, partnership-funded workshop that blames failing schools on a negative school culture. The "Capturing Kids' Hearts" strategy is to make every school employee part of a collaborative, hard-charging, consistent team that supports every child. The partnership wants all employees at each school to take the training.

The partnership also organized schoolwide cleanups at Roosevelt and Santee. The Department of Public Works pitched in by installing new lighting at Roosevelt -- an example of how the mayor can bring in city agencies.

The partnership asserts that smart-looking school uniforms -- subsidized as needed -- will be part of the culture change, as will extended school-day activities and annual goal-setting. Specific goals remain in development, but schools could be expected to double the pace of the state's academic improvement targets.

"We will transform our schools, and we will have high-performing teachers with high-performing students," said partnership Supt. of Instruction Angela Bass to the three dozen school staff members who stood in a circle at the close of last week's training session. "And we will show the world that our children are brilliant."

As a San Diego Unified administrator, Bass had spearheaded academic gains but sometimes clashed with teachers and union officials. In Los Angeles, Bass has taken pains to hear teachers' concerns: She personally called a principal to relay at least one complaint. But

it's unclear exactly how much control teachers will wield, or, conversely, whether the partnership can speed up the dismissal of habitually ineffective teachers.

So far, teacher-led transition groups have established discipline policies, hiring committees and staff-training opportunities. Teachers at several schools said they viewed the partnership as freedom from authoritarian leadership. In turn, seven of 10 principals, uncertain about their roles, have decided to leave.

But not second-year Santee Principal Richard J. Chavez, who said he prefers an inclusive style. The main difference he's seen so far is a thinner -- and potentially more responsive -- bureaucracy above him.

Principals will be judged first on student achievement, but staff and parent satisfaction also will count, said Marshall Tuck, chief executive of the partnership. Tuck had served as president and chief operating officer of Green Dot Public Schools, a charter school operator.

The mayor's schools will incorporate some Green Dot methods, such as focusing particular attention on incoming ninth-graders -- building their reading skills and instilling high expectations, Tuck said.

Principals will be expected to spend three hours a day observing teachers, he said. And they must model effective teaching while building consensus for major decisions. The Green Dot method invests budget authority, control of staff and accountability in principals -- but that stratagem could be difficult to replicate under district collective-bargaining agreements.

Under the old regime, Lee eventually got the termites handled by threatening to alert parents. That sort of move, she said, marked a teacher as a troublemaker. In fact, Lee added, she wouldn't risk telling the story at all if the same administration were still in place.

Tuck said such dynamics have to change.

"The level of animosity that exists between administrators and teachers at these school sites is so unhealthy for young people," Tuck said. "You have to increase the level of trust."

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## Mayor's schools test starts

By Rick Orlov, Staff Writer

Article Last Updated: 06/30/2008 10:34:18 PM PDT

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa takes on one of the biggest challenges of his career today as his partnership to reform education formally begins working with some of Los Angeles' worst-performing schools.

The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools initially will team up with Roosevelt High School and the Santee Education Complex as about 20,000 students return for the summer session.

But they will soon be followed by students at Hollenbeck, Stevenson, Gompers and Markham middle schools and Ritter, 99th, Figueroa and Sunrise elementary schools.

And the stakes are high for the five-year pilot reform effort to prove that urban school districts can succeed in a move that could further escalate calls to break up the nation's second-largest district.

"When we are done, I think we will show that reform works," Villaraigosa said in an interview last week. "And then I want to take these programs throughout the district to show they can work."

The kickoff comes after a two-year political battle in which the courts struck down state legislation that would have turned the Los Angeles Unified School District over to the mayor.

In the wake of that defeat, Villaraigosa spurred election of a reform slate to the seven-member LAUSD board that led to a negotiated compromise in which parents and educators at the schools voted to join the mayor's experiment to turn around low-performing schools.

"I could have backed away after it was thrown out by the courts," Villaraigosa said. "In fact, a lot of my consultants told me to concentrate on after-school programs. But this is too important. Instead, I said, 'Give me your worst schools and we will prove kids can learn.'"

By all accounts, the schools are among the worst in the district. All have been on a program-improvement watch for at least four years and are in some of the city's toughest neighborhoods.

Nearly 90 percent of students at the schools are on free or reduced-price lunch programs. All are predominantly minority students, and just 8percent of students at the high schools are proficient in English, while just 2 percent are proficient in math.

Now the schools have the promise of a new start - and ambitious goals - although winning support has not been easy.

"The administrators were kind of out of the loop when all this was going on," Sofie Freire,

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principal at Roosevelt High, said of the mayor's efforts to take over the school. "We weren't allowed to vote and it seemed like it was forced on us."

In recent months, however, the situation has improved - particularly since Angela Bass was hired from the San Diego Unified School District to serve as superintendent of instruction.

"She has been very supportive and included us in the plans," Freire said. "Now we feel they are here to support Roosevelt and what we are trying to do here."

Two weeks ago, a cleanup program was launched at each school, with city crews fixing electrical and lighting systems and giving facilities fresh coats of paint.

And transition teams of administrators, teachers and parents already have been working to develop the partnership's new programs and standards for each school.

At Roosevelt, Freire said she is developing a list of benchmarks she hopes to see students achieve over the next five years.

Villaraigosa has been hitting up private foundations to help fund his efforts and so far has received a promise of \$50 million over five years from philanthropists Richard and Melanie Lundquist.

The mayor also wants to find funding for everything from more textbooks to school

uniforms - polo shirts in each school's colors featuring the city seal.

And the mayor's team is seeking waivers from state laws to allow it to capture more money designated for specific programs.

In addition to Bass, former LAUSD Superintendent Ray Cortines has come out of retirement to work with Villaraigosa, and Marshall Tuck is chief executive of the partnership.

Tuck said the reform effort will be phased in, with the first year devoted to changing school culture and developing leadership.

"Frankly, a lot of the schools are suffering from reform fatigue," Tuck said. "There have been new superintendents and new programs almost every year, so nothing gets changed.

"What we want to do is really work with the parents, the teachers and the administrators to let them know that things will be different and they will have a chance to make an impact."

And that starts with getting greater parental involvement, Tuck said, including setting up parent centers at each school, working with staffers to treat parents well and getting instant feedback.

To set the stage, welcome receptions will be held at the schools at the start of the school year and ongoing programs will be held to keep parents involved.

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Tuck said officials expect to quickly learn whether their efforts are working by monitoring attendance.

"If kids aren't coming to class, we want to know why. And we will be tracking them to see what's going on," he said.

In the classrooms, expectations will be higher for both teachers and students, and officials will establish an achievement base line this summer when high school students take state-required standardized proficiency tests.

Steve Barr, director of the Green Dot program of charter schools, said he is confident the mayor's efforts will show quick success, but there also will be challenges.

"I give him a lot of credit for what he is trying to do," he said. "He was successful in changing the school board and now he is taking this on. The key will be to get the parents to buy in.

"In schools like this you have had generations where there is no hope. You need to get people excited and involved. All that is needed is people paying attention and putting the kids first."

Barr said attendance figures will show whether the program is getting through to the kids.

"We'll know by how many kids are still in school by Thanksgiving and, then, how many by spring break," Barr said. "If you are keeping them in class, then they are engaged and, sooner or later, a light will go on and they will perform

better."

A.J. Duffy, president of United Teachers Los Angeles, has said the union welcomes the mayor's efforts even as it has some concerns.

"What we are concerned with at the start is seeing if the mayor is sincere about teachers having a role in being at the center of decision-making," Duffy said. "We want to make sure the mayor is working collaboratively with us.

"What is success? To us, it's a variety of things. It's attendance. It's test scores. It's the level of parental involvement. Graduation rates and who is going on to college. It won't be easy."

But Duffy said teachers are willing to buy into the new program if they feel they are getting support from the mayor and the school administration.

"No teacher has asked to leave any of these campuses," Duffy said. "I think they want to see how things will work out."

Former school board member David Tokofsky, an early critic of the mayor's efforts, said it will be a tough battle.

"Ultimately, I wish them well because the work of teaching and succeeding is hard, demanding, intellectual work with little reward," Tokofsky said. "At best, progress is incremental. But I do welcome the partnership in working to educate and govern rather than politic.

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"What concerns me is that something born of politics and not policy will end up being political."