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Tri-Valley Herald (Pleasanton, CA)

June 16, 2003 Monday

**SECTION:** LOCAL & REGIONAL NEWS

**LENGTH:** 2449 words

**HEADLINE:** School disparities persist;  
Comparison finds stark contrast in campus quality between Pleasanton and Oakland middle schools

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**BODY:**

Public education isn't supposed to pick sides, but it does.

It favors Alexene Farol over Gerry Silva, two eighth-graders living 20 miles away, but worlds apart.

At Pleasanton's Harvest Park Middle School, Alexene's teachers are better than Gerry's at Havenscourt Middle School in Oakland. Her classrooms are better. Her textbooks are better. The library, the science and computer labs, the playground and the music programs are better, too.

And although Alexene is already considered socioeconomically advantaged, state tax-payers spend more money to educate her -- nearly \$27,000 more on her teachers -- than we spend on Gerry.

Their public schools are separate and unequal -- a condition only getting worse as budget cuts in California leave kids like Gerry even more vulnerable in deteriorating classrooms staffed by teachers lacking credentials.

It was never supposed to be that way.

Public schools were supposed to be the great equalizer -- the one place where kids got an equal shot at the future regardless of what life was like on the streets outside.

But public schools have never been equal. California's schools -- like those across the country -- typically reflect the condition of their communities.

Students in poor communities enter dilapidated classrooms where uncredentialed teachers with inadequate materials await -- and where parent involvement is limited or nonexistent.

In better-off neighborhoods, sometimes just a few miles away, the schools nearly sparkle, sporting the latest facility upgrades, top-notch equipment and the most experienced teachers. With nighttime PTA meetings, weekend potluck fund-raisers and various festivities, these better schools lure upwardly-mobile homebuyers drawn to the first-rate

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education and other opportunities offered to their kids.

It's a two-tiered system maintained by a convoluted funding formula that doesn't spend money based on where it will really matter, and fails to place the best teachers -- or even simply qualified teachers -- with the children who need them the most.

While politicians have loudly touted expensive education reforms, they have lacked the real political will to reform the system. Instead, they simply raise the bar on the schools and the students.

"What's there isn't good enough," said Merrill Vargo, executive director of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative, who asks whether there's the political will to say: "The public school system is one of the cornerstones of a democratic society, we have to make it work and we have to make it work for poor kids, and it's not an option to say it doesn't."

In California, schools with the highest poverty and minority enrollment have on average 20 percent uncredentialed teachers on staff compared with 5 to 6 percent of teachers at the schools with the lowest percentages of poor and minority students, according to a 2002 study by The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, a Santa Cruz-based nonprofit.

And because beginning teachers get paid about \$40,000 less than a 20-year veteran, the state's poor and minority students are often getting a bargain-basement education when it comes to what taxpayers spend on their teachers.

Resources for facilities are equally unbalanced. A 2001 California Budget Project study found the schools with the lowest test scores got about 30 percent less state bond money than they should have -- because the state allocates the money on a first-come-first-served basis rather than by greatest need.

The current budget crisis is exacerbating the situation, as parents with monetary means step in at already high-performing schools to fill in the holes left by spending cuts, leaving lagging schools to fall further behind.

With the exception of the rural South, California's low-performing schools are among the worst in the nation, said Linda Darling-Hammond, of the Stanford University of education and a national expert on education reform.

"I personally had never seen kids receive as low-quality an education as I found in districts like Oakland, Ravenswood, San Francisco and Compton," she added. "It's just really tragic."

Funding is a mess

Money talks.

But money talks a lot louder for some California kids than others.

Across the state, the majority of education dollars are doled out to schools not based upon need, but rather 30-year-old formulas from pre-Proposition 13 property tax rates and subsequent legislative efforts to equalize funding, but nonetheless give some districts hundreds or even thousands of dollars more per child than others.

The result is a mess, according to state and local officials.

"California school finance is such -- somebody called it a Winchester Mystery House -- that the way it is put together makes absolutely no sense," said school board president Terry Thygesen, of Menlo Park City Elementary, where they get about \$11,000 to spend on each child, including all public funding, parent contributions and a parcel tax.

In Dublin, where the standardized tests scores are among the state's best, the district received \$7,839 in total revenue for each of its 4,421 students during the 2001-2002 academic year, according to the state-supported Education

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Data Partnership.

Over the hill in Hayward, officials received \$7,180 to spend on each of its 24,199 students -- nearly \$16 million less than if funded at the same level as Dublin.

Or head east to Manteca, where officials got by with \$6,393 for each of 21,309 students.

The explanation for such differences?

"You can never explain it to a real person because there is no rationale about why a district will get a much higher level of funding than another," said state Sen. Dede Alpert, D-San Diego, a vocal advocate for education in the Legislature.

That means schools with the most disadvantaged students don't have any advantage when it comes to getting more basic education dollars to cope. The fact that Gerry can't take home a history textbook for homework -- because there's only one classroom set -- falls on deaf fiscal ears.

In fact, the system favors white and wealthy kids.

According to a 1999-2000 study by The Education Trust, a national nonprofit dedicated to closing the achievement gap, California spent \$5,036 per student in districts with the highest minority enrollment, \$369 less than low-minority districts, and \$5,202 per student in districts with the highest poverty levels, \$59 less than low-poverty districts.

That includes categorical state funding for programs often targeted to low-income students and low-performing schools.

Granted, it doesn't include the more than \$1 billion in annual federal Title I money for the state's low-income students. Title I money pays for tutoring programs, classroom aides, materials, curriculum and some teaching positions, but it still hasn't significantly closed the gap, according to federal research.

Some say the money is spread too thin, others say it doesn't address the actual quality of teachers and facilities, focusing too much on aides and administrators.

More importantly, Title I money is supposed to provide additional resources for disadvantaged students and was never intended to make up for the short shrift in state school spending.

"Those kids need a heck of a lot more resources than the well-to-do, upper-middle-class, educated students," said Paul Goldfinger, vice president of School Services of California, a school finance consulting firm. "We have a system that does it on the cheap and hopes that it works out."

Money follows teachers

The financial inequalities, however, are magnified when tracked to the classroom. Although districts get a set amount of money per student, the money follows the teachers, not the kids.

This year, taxpayers spent \$82,126 to teach Alexene for the six hours she was at school each day in Pleasanton. In Oakland, taxpayers spent \$55,199 to teach Gerry for his six hours of classes. That's a \$26,927 difference.

While that says nothing about the quality of their teachers, California schools don't allocate money for teachers based on quality. They pay teachers based on whether they have a credential and the number of years they've been teaching.

Alexene's teachers all have credentials, and almost all have at least two decades of experience, if not three. Only

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Gerry's gym teacher is fully qualified to teach. The rest lack a full credential and have one or two years of experience.

Yet, educators say, all schools are subject to the state's high-stakes accountability system.

And all children are subject to the same standardized tests, whether they get a \$10,000 public education in high-ranking Menlo Park or a \$6,400 version in middle-of-the-pack Manteca.

That means Gerry takes the same tests as Alexene.

The odds are his scores will be lower.

At Havenscourt, standardized test scores are among the worst in the state -- with an Academic Performance Index of 446 on a 1,000-point scale. At Harvest Park, test scores are among the state's best, with an API of 838.

"These scores are not imprinted on kids' DNA," said BASRC's Vargo. "They're a reflection of what they're taught. It's just tragic when that happens and it's happening every day in those schools."

Spending doesn't keep pace

After Proposition 13 passed in 1978 -- shifting property tax dollars and education finance to the state -- legislators set about boosting funding in districts whose local property taxes left them at a previous disadvantage.

Yet at the same time, California's school spending has failed to keep pace with other states. The overall quality of California's schools fell from among the best in the country to the bottom of the barrel.

Local school districts were forced to become creative or watch the quality of their classrooms continue to decline. Parents created nonprofit education foundations, pouring millions into district coffers.

And districts started to pass parcel taxes. Well, some did.

According to a 2001 report by the Public Policy Institute of California, parcel taxes are passed primarily in districts with high-income and highly educated parents -- raising an average \$500 per student.

Of the 62 districts that passed parcel or assessment taxes between 1983 and 2002, nearly four out of five were in the Bay Area, with 14 in Marin County alone. Five have been in Alameda County, eight in San Mateo County and zero in San Joaquin County.

Emeryville, Burlingame, San Mateo-Foster City and San Carlos were among the few who got the minimum two-thirds vote to pass a parcel tax in a special election on June 3.

"The government is just not giving enough funds and paying for things to give a quality education," said Lynne Young, president of the Menlo-Atherton Education Foundation, where the district gets about \$800,000 from parcel taxes each year.

What about the districts that can't pass a tax?

"It's in high-minority, low-income schools that kids are basically being abandoned," Darling-Hammond said. "Increasingly, it looks like some kids are just being written off in terms of education."

Money not the answer?

There are those who say that even if we spent more money on the children who need the most help, it wouldn't matter much. They say socio-economics determine a child's future more than teachers, textbooks or comfortable classrooms, so we need to fix society rather than fix the schools.

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"You can't say all you have to do is put the best highly qualified teacher in that classroom or the best principal or equalize funding or fix the bathrooms," said state facility director Brooks. "Kids ideally would come from families with adequate parent support. They would adequately be fed. Obviously, you can't fix it all. It isn't just an educational problem."

True, but that doesn't justify the disparity, education activists say.

"Changes in the system are just too hard if the adults responsible for the change in the end don't believe these kids can learn as much as the white and Asian kids," said Russlyn Ali, director of The Education Trust-West. "You have to change the way people think about poor and minority people. Everybody has the right to learn. Everybody can learn."

Fixing the system requires radical change -- changes in the way we fund schools and facilities and changes in the way we place teachers, say educators, activists and even politicians.

State Sen. Alpert is working to implement a state master plan for education, which among other things would establish what a quality education looks like and how much it costs.

On top of that, the state would then add more money to accommodate the extra needs of low-income students. "Believe me, I don't think this is going to be easy," Alpert said.

These changes would require extraordinary political will by state officials -- a factor often missing when it comes to creating true change for children like Gerry.

"I think the middle class doesn't know how bad the Havenscourts are," said John Affeldt, a managing attorney of San Francisco-based Public Advocates Inc. "And I think if they did, there would be more political will."

The state has undertaken massive education reform efforts in the last several years, but many programs -- like some teacher recruiting and retention efforts -- have fallen by the wayside in the lean budget times. Or, like class size reduction, they are offered to everyone, thus sustaining or even widening the gap in quality.

#### Forcing the issue

Frustrated with state inaction, civil rights activists sued the state in May 2000 to force elected officials to address the disparity. The Williams v. State of California lawsuit hopes to force the state's hand in fixing Gerry's school and thos in similar straits.

"We have a system where some schools are getting funded more than others," said Affeldt, who helped file the lawsuit in state Superior Court. "I don't think the public wants those conditions to continue either. If we're not educating those kids, we're not going to be able to maintain the level of economic prosperity we have."

In the meantime, vast inequalities in public education will continue to be the norm in our public schools.

And that will have repercussions not only for students like Gerry, but for every taxpayer in the state.

"We will continue as a state to get sued by people who argue there is no equity," Alpert said, referring to the pending Williams case. "Sometimes [a lawsuit] seems to be the only thing that gets people going. It's an awful sad reality."

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**LOAD-DATE:** July 2, 2003