

Check out Town Square!

Hundreds of local topics are being discussed by local residents on Town Square, a reader forum sponsored by the Weekly on our community website at www.PaloAltoOnline.com. Post your own comments, ask questions, read the Editor's blog or just stay up on what people are talking about around town!

Guest Opinion

Superman? We really need more Clark Kents

by Peter Fortenbaugh

“Waiting for Superman,” the new documentary that dramatizes the sad state of American education, tells a central truth: Too many of our children are failing in school.

As a Palo Alto resident, I am fortunate to be able to send my own children to an outstanding public school where academic success is the norm. But as the executive director of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula, where I've worked for the past eight years, I see first hand the issues raised in the movie.

At BGCP we work daily with 1,400 students to help them understand the importance of education. We help them select the right schools, including private and charter schools. We collaborate directly with five school districts and two community colleges.

We see some of our members thriving at large public schools — and we see too many who are not.

Our community here in Silicon Valley isn't an urban center such as the ones in the movie. But in some of our neighborhoods — right in the technology heart of this country — two-thirds of our kids are not graduating from high school.

“Waiting for Superman” dramatically illustrates this crisis. Are we as a society willing to let this continue?

We can begin to fix our local education system without the cape and tights — as everyday Clark Kents — by getting involved, changing structures and increasing funding.

I know from personal experience that teachers and administrators want the best for their students and that they work hard to help them. This is not a good guys vs. bad guys scenario. But as long as we see this as someone else's problem or fault, real change will be elusive.

Education is a community responsibility. Schools and teachers are a key part of the solution, not the entire solution. Until we accept that fact, we are just passing the buck. At my children's schools, parent volunteers allow for small reading groups, individual math instruction, field trips, games at recess and other features.

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Charter schools have also demonstrated the power of parent volunteers. And there are many people in our community who would help kids other than their own — if they just knew how.

At BGCP we engage over 300 volunteers to mentor and tutor our members. We need to open our schools to



engage community volunteers with activities like reading, tutoring, recreation, homework, being a teacher's aide -- not to take the place of certified teachers but to support them.

We must prepare children to succeed by investing in preschool, after-school, summer and mentoring programs. The school drop-outs I see face challenges outside of school that are more daunting than any algebra equation. To succeed academically, all students need to feel safe, have a sense of belonging and have positive relationships with caring adults. They need positive role models who help them understand why school matters.

We must prepare children to succeed by investing in preschool, after-school, summer and mentoring programs. The school drop-outs I see face challenges outside of school that are more daunting than any algebra equation. To succeed academically, all students need to feel safe, have a sense of belonging and have positive relationships with caring adults. They need positive role models who help them understand why school matters.

We need proactive school boards — the true heroes are public-school board members. They are the ones who set expectations and demand action. They select the superintendent and negotiate with teachers. They can cooperate with charter schools and replicate good ideas across all schools. They can influence the community to get involved.

If you can't personally serve, help the best candidates get elected.

Locally, we need a unified K-12 district. In our highest drop-out communities, we have separate K-8 and high school districts. The lower schools claim the high schools are failing and the high schools say the kids arrive too far behind to catch up.

Both perspectives have some truth, and a unified district will stop the finger-pointing and create accountability.

Schools should be neighborhood-based. Many of our students we serve commute one to two hours a day to high school. They often feel disconnected and isolated in their new environments. They lose precious study time on a bus. What message are we sending our children when we don't even provide a local school for them?

We need to increase funding for many schools. Yes inefficiencies exist and money doesn't solve all problems. But if money isn't important to improving education, why do Hillsborough parents contribute \$2,000 per child per year? Why do private schools spend double what public schools do per child? Why do charter schools raise additional funds?

“Waiting for Superman” has done a great service by highlighting the education crisis. Now it's time for us Clark Kents to get into the act and make sure something happens in our school or district. ■

Peter Fortenbaugh is a Palo Alto resident and parent, and executive director of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula. He can be e-mailed at peter@bgcp.org.

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CITY OF PALO ALTO NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the Palo Alto City Council will hold a public hearing at the special Council meeting on Monday, October 25, 2010 at 7:00 p.m. or as near thereafter as possible, in the Council Chambers, 250 Hamilton Avenue, Palo Alto, to Consider Certification of Final EIR for the Proposed 405 Lincoln Avenue Single Family Residential Replacement Project and approval of Demolition Delay for the existing residence at 405 Lincoln which is listed as a Contributing Structure in the Professorville National Register Historic District and a contributing resource to the Professorville Historic District on the City's Historic Inventory.

DONNA J. GRIDER, MMC
City Clerk

Answers to this week's puzzles, which can be found on page 59

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