

Blowback

LAUSD's summer school cuts mean disaster for kids

Our refusal to pay slightly more in taxes puts at-risk children in real danger.

By Gisselle Acevedo

June 3, 2009

The headline for the May 29 Times article was grim enough: "[L.A. Unified School District cancels bulk of summer school programs.](#)" On reading these words and the details laid out in the article, I was outraged. Eliminating summer school programs in our state's largest school district is tragic, and the consequences of this decision will be devastating.

But saying this is not enough. Without firsthand knowledge of the importance of these programs, people may feel empathy, even outrage, for the at-risk families most affected by L.A. Unified's planned cuts. Still, many will be spared the awful clarity that comes from real experience. In service to them, I have decided to share mine.

When I was 11 years old, my mother, who was single and spoke little English, decided that she needed to move us to a better neighborhood. We were poor, so she worked several jobs to support us and acquire the means to fulfill her wishes. Consequently, during the summer I was alone -- all day long. She instructed me never to leave our house and told me that our doors and windows were to remain locked all day. I was a good, smart and obedient little girl and I loved my mother.

But this particular summer in Los Angeles was unusually hot, and our apartment was very small, lonely and stuffy. What could it hurt to sit outside our front door for a bit? I decided, only once, to go outside, and I never left the porch. But as I sat on my doorstep, three older boys came to me. They surrounded me, grabbed me and took me to the apartment next door. Since then, I have tried in vain to forget that day.

Eliminating summer school means more parents will be forced to choose between feeding their children or protecting their children. They simply won't be able to do both. Children who would otherwise be capable of pulling themselves out of poverty by eventually going to college will not be given the opportunity to do so thanks to their inability to take the classes they need. More will turn to drugs, violence and gangs. Children will be locked in hot apartments during the day or be left alone at night. More innocent little girls will become victims of horrific violence.

I hope my story will stir people to action. I fear, however, that those who do not live in such circumstances will find ways to inoculate themselves against problems they truly cannot imagine. I have watched movies in which inner-city children romp and laugh as they are sprayed by an open fire hydrant, jubilant in their release from the oppression of urban life and summer heat.

These images may alleviate our guilt or stir some longing for a simpler era, but they are not real.

Here's what is real: If we choose to accept that impoverished families will no longer receive critical services such as healthcare and summer school, we had better prepare ourselves for more maladaptive behaviors, more remedial reading programs and more gang prevention efforts. We should prepare ourselves to live in a state of failure and gird our egos to be known as the state that used to be a model for public education.

I agree that nonprofits and government-funded programs should be held to a high standard. I also understand that families are struggling and that higher vehicle license fees and sales taxes are not desirable, but they are necessary and may even be more acceptable to many Californians than the governor's rhetoric implies.

While we may not like paying higher taxes, the alternative is the dismantling of our educational system and, in this case, fewer opportunities for impoverished children. This should be unacceptable to anyone who cares about the future of our state and of our nation.

Gisselle Acevedo is president and chief executive of Para Los Niños, a nonprofit organization that provides educational and support services to low-income children and families.