

New Benchmarking Study Shows PAUSD Maintaining Program Elements, But Lower Staffing Levels Limit Robustness.

Lower staffing levels caused by inherent limitations in public funding.

OCTOBER 26, 2006 -- Palo Alto, California. A landmark benchmarking study just completed by Palo Alto Partners in Education (PiE), a non-profit organization that raises private funds for the Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD), revealed that PAUSD, though hampered by significantly lower levels of public funding and staffing than other districts in the study, nevertheless manages to retain key educational programs. PAUSD's operational spending per student (\$11,970 in 2005-06) is the lowest of districts included in the study and it is \$1030 lower per student than the median in dollars adjusted for local salaries. Without additional private funding through parent fees and organizations like PiE and the PTA, PAUSD spending would be off the median by approximately \$1700 per student.

In a six-month study, PAUSD and five other top-performing districts (Scarsdale in New York, New Trier/Wilmette in Illinois, Wellesley in Massachusetts, Chapel Hill-Carrboro in North Carolina, and Edina in Minnesota) were compared on a variety of budgetary, programmatic, staffing, and technology metrics using 2005-06 data. Districts were selected based on demographic similarities to PAUSD and high student achievement, using SAT scores as the primary indicator. Among the selected districts, PAUSD and Scarsdale have the top mean SAT scores, 1278 and 1275, respectively. The study was led by Lois Garland (PiE Board – VP for Governance) and four PiE volunteers Erina DuBois, Elisabeth Einaudi, Xenia Hammer and Julie Williams who worked very closely with the participating districts to evaluate the data presented in this study.

The study found that PAUSD has the most restrictive public funding model due to Proposition 13 and no ability to adjust funding annually, except through private donations. This results in the lowest operational spending per student and a corresponding \$1030 per student negative deviation from the median in dollars adjusted for local salaries. "Proposition 13 has a huge impact," said Garland. "Additionally, unlike most other districts, we can't annually adjust our local revenue to allow staffing or program enhancements or to offset decreases in revenue from other sources."

Lower funding directly results in PAUSD having the highest ratios of students to all staff (8.8 vs. a median of 6.6) and students to teachers (15.2 vs. a median of 12.1). While PAUSD's class size of 21 at elementary schools is on norm with other districts, its middle school (25 vs. a median of 23) and high school (27.5 vs. median of 23.5) class sizes are larger. Budget constraints also impact PAUSD's ability to upgrade technology. PAUSD has the highest student to computer ratio, the oldest student computers and the lowest district funding for instructional hardware and software.

At elementary schools, relatively low staff levels coupled with a shorter school day (30-60 minutes shorter than all school districts except for Scarsdale) contribute to a host of predictable shortfalls. PAUSD allots students the least amount of time with credentialed elementary school specialists, such as physical education teachers, art teachers, or music teachers. In particular, PAUSD has almost no special options at the kindergarten level and is the only district that has not implemented a non-immersion world languages program in elementary school. However, the district has established innovative art and physical education programs to ensure that our students still have access to these activities and offers more school choice options, such as the alternative programs offered at Hoover and Ohlone Elementary Schools, than any other benchmark district.

In middle schools, PAUSD is above or on the norm with other districts in program options in science, English, social studies, art, music, vocational education, physical education, drama. The district defines a Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program that is on track with that offered by other benchmark districts, but provides fewer GATE specialists to support differentiation in the classroom. In math, PAUSD employs a pedagogical approach that calls for fewer middle school math lanes than in other benchmark districts. Also PAUSD's world language program starts a year later than that of most other districts, a delay all the more significant given absence of a non-immersion world language program in elementary school.

In high schools, the English and math department options are upper tier among benchmark districts. Additionally, PAUSD offers more alternative learning experiences and programs than any other benchmark district. PAUSD's world language, art, drama and Advanced Placement (AP) course options are on the norm, while social studies, science, music, physical education, and vocational education departments provide fewer course options than the norm. Although counselor to student ratio is on the norm at middle school level, PAUSD lags behind all other districts on student to counselor ratio at high school level.

In her synopsis of the study, Garland added that the big picture for PAUSD is complex. "We have to keep in mind the context with which we're making these comparisons. We're benchmarking PAUSD against the very best. For the most part our district offers comparable program elements, but resource constraints often limit PAUSD's delivery capability and program robustness."

PAUSD Superintendent Mary Frances Callan commented, "In reviewing the key findings, the community should feel extremely proud of their support of children, their education, and this foundation [PiE]. We owe a tremendous debt of thanks to these volunteers as the data will be invaluable to us - Board, staff, and the community - and will allow us to reflect upon the work we are able to accomplish in comparison with other national high performing districts."

Susan Bailey, President of PiE hopes that "this study will allow PiE to work with PAUSD and use these findings to identify critical targets for our future fund raising initiatives."

PiE is holding a community forum at Jordan Middle School on Wednesday November 1st from 7:00-9:00pm. Lois Garland, PiE Board Member who led the study, will present key findings. Lois, members of her team, and key district personnel will also be available for Q&A.

PiE's mission is to partner with parents, the Palo Alto school district, and the community to raise funds for achieving educational excellence for every student in the district. PiE focuses effort on lowering student-to-teacher ratios, enhancing technology resources, and providing curriculum support. Its initiatives are customized to meet the differing needs of elementary, middle, and high schools.

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