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Villaraigosa and his partners set for school to start

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

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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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