

Extracurricular isn't an extra

BY EMILY SVENSON

Access to quality education is a right of all Americans and a community's responsibility. Equipping children with the skills and knowledge to succeed in the future pays financial dividends for a community. Given the complexity of the world today, it is more important than ever to provide all of our children with a solid foundation to thrive. Hyde Park schools are fulfilling that mission admirably.

Key components in this success are special-topic classes and extra-curricular activities. In addition to enjoying sports, FDR High School graduate Hannah Black notes, "The debate and mock trial teams helped me develop my mind through critical thinking and analysis." She also cites classes like business law, graphics and piano as providing the opportunity to explore possible interests and career paths. After college, Black returned to her native Hyde Park and has served the community through positions in state and local government.

Arts programs here are universally touted as top-notch. Dr. Wendy Urban-Mead, a professor, former high school teacher and parent, says prestigious art schools recruit at FDR. Why? Because FDR students are instilled with a strong foundation by talented teachers who are themselves artists. Performing arts programs are thriving, and Urban-Mead particularly credits caring teachers' efforts to involve students of all abilities and economic backgrounds. This year, the middle school's musical theater production was available to cast members at no cost, and rehearsals were scheduled on days when a late bus could bring students home to include those without the luxury of an at-home parent to pick them up.

My son attends North Park Elementary School, and I'm impressed with the science program that provides children of all backgrounds with hands-on opportunities. Through animal care, stream monitoring programs and science fairs starting in kindergarten, children have genuine access to the scientific method and are not just consuming facts. At the high school level, science electives like ecology prepare students to analyze and act on critical global challenges.

Children are all different and resonate with a vast variety of subjects that could lead to future careers. Students who might be left behind in a program limited to the basic "three Rs" can be engaged by involvement in sports, performing arts, technical classes

or clubs. A local family court attorney shared that many children who end up in the court system lack an outlet in the schools, instead becoming trouble makers and burdening taxpayers. Conversely, strong schools enhance community morale and are known to increase property values and home sales.

Two ways to continue providing quality and equity in education are:

1. Maintain a variety of focus areas to allow every student to maximize his or her potential; and

2. Structure programs so they're accessible to all, regardless of financial means.

With this in mind, let's consider this year's proposed Hyde Park school budget. Property taxes are a real problem, and we could debate all day about the tax base and the district's management choices. The fact is most school expenses are embedded in contracts and not subject to voter approval. Like it or not, when we vote on the school budget, there is a less than 1% difference between the proposed budget and the austerity or "contingency" plan. That 1% affects equipment, school supplies, athletics, co-curricular activities, field trips and extended-day programs for children who need extra help, among other things.

Cutting the budget places a regressive burden on families who would have more out-of-pocket expenses for school supplies, and deepens the disparity between those who can and can't afford to pay. It would reduce opportunities for students denied educational equipment and programs. In short, it would narrow options for our children to develop the passions that will propel them into the world.

Today's fast-paced, high-tech and communication-oriented economy is like nothing in our nation's past. Our future depends on preparing all of our students, regardless of background, to succeed in the array of challenges and opportunities before them.

An investment in education is an investment in our community. Please take a moment to review the various propositions and school board candidate bios at www.hydeparkschools.org and decide what our community needs. Then vote on May 18!

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