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\$8.5 Million Benefits Program That Keeps Pupils After School

By DAVE LONG

Anyone committed to improving California's educational system had to be heartened by February's news that Donald Bren, chairman of the Irvine Co., had awarded one of the largest private gifts ever to an after-school program. Bren's \$8.5 million donation to THINK Together, which serves about 10,000 children in Los Angeles County, shows great leadership by the business community and educational leaders to join together in support of programs that serve our children best.

Those familiar with Bren and the Irvine Co.'s commitment to professionalism and quality know that Bren would only make such a donation were he certain that THINK Together met his own high standards. It certainly does, and his support dates back to THINK's beginning a decade ago. Bren knows that THINK, which typically operates in schools with a free and reduced lunch population greater than 50 percent, offers a proven, tested curriculum that combines homework help, academic enrichment, structured physical activity and nutrition education. His latest gift is simply his most generous and targeted. It comes just a year after THINK expanded its services to 20,000 students in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties, making it one of the largest after-school providers in the country. With Bren's gift, THINK Together expects to expand its services again to 30,000 students.

Bren's gift, obviously, is quite generous and THINK's cause a worthy one. But what is its importance for Los Angeles' business community? Three items leap immediately to my mind.

Helping kids

First and foremost is the unquestionably positive impact that quality after-school programs such as THINK make on our children. They are instrumental in helping elementary students bridge the "achievement gap," in which Latino and African-American children perform more poorly than their white counterparts.

Further, students who attend after-school programs are half as likely to drop out of school and more than twice as likely to continue their education after graduating high school as their peers. That translates to a better prepared workforce, with the skills Los Angeles businesses will need to continue thriving well into the 21st century.

If that seems a bit distant, here is an even more immediate benefit for business: A 2004 Brandeis University study estimated that decreased worker productivity caused by stress and absenteeism

related to after-school issues costs employers between \$500 and \$2,000 per employee per year. Programs such as THINK remove that worry for parents by removing children from the well-documented “danger zone” of 3 to 6 p.m., when kids are most likely to get into trouble.

It is important to know, though, that THINK does far more than “baby-sit” kids after the school day ends. The kids in THINK, one of the best tested and most soundly designed programs around, demonstrate incredible improvement in school. Sixty-five percent show significant improvement in math and 60 percent show similarly high advances in reading. Teachers report an overwhelming majority of THINK participants do better in the classroom. Perhaps most importantly, surveys of the students themselves show that 68 percent feel better about their ability to read and speak English, 81 percent are more comfortable solving math problems and fully 86 percent report an improvement on homework completion.

By supporting THINK, Bren is ensuring that its important work continues and that it is able to refine its programs further as it grows. Notably, his gift included a \$150,000 leadership grant to help THINK’s expansion in eastern Los Angeles County, where there is still much need for after-school instruction despite THINK’s work there.

Private-public partners

Also, and I THINK this is no less important, Bren’s gift is a superb and innovative example of the private-public partnerships that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has said will be key to California’s continued growth and improvement. Typically, these P3 arrangements are infrastructure based and promise great public benefit in the form of new roads, new housing and other similar developments. But business leaders should not limit their THINKing when it comes to P3 investment. As Bren has demonstrated in working with THINK Together, there is no end to the design and nature of P3 investment that California business can make. That bodes extremely well for our state’s economic health.

Finally, there is the challenge to other business leaders that I THINK is implicit in Bren’s gift. He has stepped up, forcefully, and shown that investing in our communities is vitally important. I wonder who will follow him next with a similar demonstration of generosity. And, when they do, what better investment than to ensure our children receive the best possible education?

Dave Long is the California secretary of education.