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Council going `back to school' PUSD plans eyed

By Kenneth Todd Ruiz Staff Writer
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PASADENA - Whether driven by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa or the Pasadena City Council, the trend of political fixes to address the public's anxiety about education will only grow, a number of political experts said Friday.

On Monday, the council will consider two proposals to change how trustees of the Pasadena schools are elected, in the run-up to an Aug. 11 deadline to get them before voters on the November ballot.

"Education is becoming ... one of the permanent issues of public life," said Jonathan Wilcox, a political science professor at USC and former member of Gov. Pete Wilson's office of education. "I would expect to see these scenarios played out in different forms up and down the state - with no end in sight."

Councilwoman Joyce Streater's proposal would do away with the current school board selection system and have all candidates for open seats in an at-large election, eliminating the need for a majority of votes and runoff elections.

A second proposal, by Councilman Steve Haderlein, would create geographic subdistricts, with the school board president elected citywide - similar to how the City Council is picked.

Political scientists and community members have identified pratfalls with either system, with most calling for the city to cool its heels and give the matter deeper consideration.

Michael Alvarez, professor of political science at Caltech, said although something should be done to address community concerns about the school board's responsiveness, a thorough study of the merits of such proposals needs to be done.

"Someone really needs to put together a group of people who care about the issue and study the issue to evaluate the many proposals and focus on only a couple," he said.

It's a historic opportunity, Alvarez said, where frustration about public school issues have come to a head and there is a willingness to do something - but the stakes are high.

"There's a lot of energy here for doing some serious reform, and we ought to really use that energy consciously," Alvarez said.

Fred Register is a local political operator who has put candidates into the board room at PUSD's headquarters on Hudson Avenue and the Legislature in Sacramento.

He isn't crazy about either council proposal, but agreed that the current system has its flaws.

"It increasingly funnels the decisions on school board members into very low-turnout, general elections," Register said, adding that frequent runoff elections generally only draw 9 percent to 10 percent of voters.

In the current system, candidates file for a specific seat up for grabs on the seven-member body, competing only against those running for that seat.

That can lead to decreased competition, Register said.

At Monday's meeting, Prentice Deadrick, school board president, will summarize the opinions of his six colleagues as voiced during a Thursday evening meeting.

Even some school board members have said they would like to see changes - Trustee Esteban Lizardo gave support to Haderlein's districting idea on Thursday.

But most openly opposed either change.

Pointing to the concentration of a majority of PUSD students in small areas, board members Ed Honowitz and Bill Bibbiani have said any potential districts would end up with grossly disproportional numbers of actual students.

Haderlein said that could be a motive to make the district - which has seen a steep drop in enrollment - more attractive to families in those districts with few students.

"I don't think that link is very strong," said Jack Pitney, government professor at Claremont McKenna College. "I think for most people, voting in school elections and their decisions on where to send their children are unrelated."

Haderlein last week said his proposal may need more time to be implemented.

November election results wouldn't be certified until December, during the filing period for candidates for the next school board election in March.

That doesn't leave enough time for studying and drawing up districts, said Martin Truitt, who has run several school board campaigns.

And Streator's proposed plurality system, where popular candidates can split votes and potentially elevate a darkhorse challenger, worries some.

"With any system where you can win with less than a majority is the possibility that you could end up with candidates that are actually opposed by the majority," Pitney said.

Pitney also warned such candidates may not just be less popular - they could be strongly opposed by the majority of voters.

Truitt has cautioned such a system could see the likes of the PUSD's arch-critic Rene Amy catapulted into office.

In 2000, voters rejected a plan to create voting subdistricts in the PUSD, the only one of four charter reform initiatives to fail that year.

Whatever the outcome, Wilcox said Pasadena's experience will likely be mirrored throughout the state.

"This is a hat trick of political unhappiness. ... \ sense there is restlessness out there, and they want to make sure they are ahead of it," he said.

But despite admirable motives, there is no easy, one-size-fits-all solution, Wilcox said, and politicians should be uncharacteristically honest about the expectations they attach to their solutions.

"When it comes to schools, no one has all the answers, and it's going to take decades," he said.

todd.ruiz@sqvn.com

(626) 578-6300, Ext. 4444