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SANDY BANKS:

School has a silver lining -- with a cloud

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Barbara Davidson/Los Angeles Times

Children play at Castle Heights Elementary, a once-struggling campus where success has meant a cut in funding and larger classes.

Castle Heights Elementary is so successful that it's losing funding and has larger classes.

Sandy Banks
 May 2, 2009

I wouldn't blame the parents and teachers at Castle Heights Elementary if they are ruining their success.

A five-year campaign by local moms has drawn dozens of new neighborhood children to the spruced-up Westside campus. Their parents' money and volunteer efforts have helped teachers raise student test scores by 85 points, enough to put Castle Heights in the top tier of Los Angeles Unified elementaries.

So what's the problem?

The new kids are too white. And too rich.

The school district's guidelines mandate larger class sizes for campuses that are considered integrated. And national funding formulas only allocate federal money to schools with a high percentage of low-income students.

Those standards -- coupled with districtwide budget cuts -- cost Castle Heights more than \$50,000 this year and will increase class size in fourth and fifth grades from 28 to 36 students come September.

"Try teaching writing and math to 36 fourth-graders," teacher Pam Chinelli told me as she herded her 20 third-graders onto a bus -- paid for by parents -- for a trip to the California Heritage Square Museum.

"We're a very diverse school, ethnically and economically," she said. "But we're stuck between a rock and a hard place now. Our school has been successful, and we're being punished for it."

It's rare to find a school in this district with a higher percentage of white pupils than either Latino, black or Asian students. At Castle Heights, 38.5% of the students are white. That's up from 23.8% when the parents' campaign began five years ago.

Then Castle Heights was considered, in school-district jargon, PHBAO -- Predominantly Hispanic, black, Asian and other nonwhite. That made it eligible for

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smaller classes and more money.

But once a school's white enrollment hits 30%, it loses that bonus. Only 80 of almost 800 campuses fall into that category.

The distinction was created in 1979 to make up for "the harms of racial isolation" and help settle a desegregation lawsuit by encouraging schools in white neighborhoods to accept bused-in minority students.

Then, the district was 27% white, 24% black, 7% Asian and 41% Latino, and most kids attended school with other students who looked just like them.

PHBAO status "was strictly a racial issue," explained Sharon Curry, the district's assistant superintendent for integration. Even now, she said, it's less about academic improvement than social interaction.

But the Los Angeles of today is a melting pot of color and culture. How do you impose a 30-year-old integration standard on a system that is only 9% white, and is now 73% Latino, 11% black and 6% Asian?

Castle Heights Principal Patricia Godon Tann didn't complain last year when her budget was cut. Her parent group helped make up the difference. She understands that some schools need help leveling the playing field for kids from poor families.

"But PHBAO just recognizes race," she said. "It doesn't reflect the academic needs of the kids."

It's true that white and Asian students outperform blacks and Latinos in Los Angeles schools. That reflects not just color, but economics -- and school district policies that hamstring principals and saddle low-income classrooms with rookie instructors.

At Castle Heights, one-fifth of the 560 children are still learning English, and 20 different languages are spoken.

But PHBAO counts immigrant kids from Russia and Iran -- who don't speak English and live in cramped apartments along National Boulevard -- the same as the children of lawyers and college professors with multimillion-dollar homes in the hills above campus.

I walked the playground with Tann and a pair of moms on Thursday; it looked like a junior United Nations. The parents from the booster club told me that's part of what drew them to the campus.

"We wanted both the old-fashioned 'walk to school with your neighbors' thing, and a chance for them to see what the rest of the world is like," said Victoria Rierdan Hurley, whose son is a kindergartner.

They pointed with pride to the amenities they've funded: the grapevines outside the kindergarten classroom, the flower boxes flanking the quad, the children's art displays in the hall and a garden designed by a Getty Museum curator.

But how much does that matter when you have 36 children in a class?

Maria von Hartz is one of the parents responsible for the infusion of neighborhood children. Like most of her neighbors, she was resigned to shelling out for private school tuition. "We heard so much negative about L.A. Unified."

Then her mother-in-law, a public school teacher, dragged her to a Castle Heights open house. She liked what she saw enough to go door-to-door, drumming up enrollees to join her son and daughter at the school. Now, she worries what the influx of white, middle-class kids will cost teachers and students.

"It's a little bitter irony," she said. "Don't think that thought hasn't kept me up at night."

Still, the school is clearly better off than it was. It has daily PE classes, a music teacher, art lessons, a pottery kiln, teachers' aide and a science lab -- all courtesy of the booster club, which raised \$250,000 last year.

Their pride and joy is a parent-funded technology center with 28 computers. One for every student.

Until next year, that is, when they will need to find room -- and money -- for eight more.

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