

Governor's wife visits inner-city school

It's serving as a testing ground

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Clutching his favorite book, "Animorphs," 9-year-old Felipe Penagos eagerly obliged a request yesterday from Sharon Davis, whom he called "the government's first lady."

Felipe flipped open the book and started reading to the governor's wife, who wants to become the eyes and ears of California's classrooms.

In keeping with her goal of visiting at least one school a week, Davis toured Rosa Parks Elementary School in City Heights yesterday, taking time to read from a book to schoolchildren and to hear them read aloud.

"I've been to a lot of schools," she told Felipe. "But yours is one of the best I have ever seen."

Part of a three-campus inner-city intervention project developed in collaboration with Price Charities and San Diego State University, Rosa Parks Elementary has become the educational version of a teaching hospital.

Funded by an \$18 million gift from local philanthropist Sol Price, the pilot project has brought students, faculty and resources from a cross section of SDSU -- including the education, business and health sciences departments -- to Rosa Parks and two other schools in City Heights, one of San Diego's poorest and most ethnically diverse neighborhoods.

Davis was born in San Diego and grew up in Santee.

She said inner-city neighborhoods like City Heights have always struggled with issues -- like gangs and crime -- and need special attention from educators. She would like the program to become a model for collaborative school efforts in California.

"You can see that the investments from private foundations make a big difference," Davis said. "There is only so much the government can do. We are educating 5.3 million students . . . Maybe other companies will come forward to help out."

On hand for yesterday's tour, and eager to show off their innovative program, were SDSU President Stephen Weber, Sol Price and San Diego schools chief Alan Bersin.

"The best part about this is that the students are getting more attention from teachers and student teachers," Weber said. "They know their school is special. And with events like this, they feel even more special."

More than four months after Gov. Gray Davis was elected, Sharon Davis said she has become more and more involved in education issues. Bersin called her "an important adviser to the governor."

During yesterday's stop in City Heights, she met with a small group of parents for lunch and an informal talk about schools. She fielded questions on issues ranging from bilingual education and overcrowding to test scores and after-school programs.

The former PSA flight attendant demonstrated her knowledge and interest in education.

Regarding Proposition 227, which virtually eliminated traditional bilingual education programs in California, Davis said: "It wasn't the right answer, but it's an answer that we are living with right now. I think people voted for it because they want children to speak English very well."

She praised several San Diego programs that offer after-school activities, and she urged parents to stay involved with their children's education.

"Kids whose parents are involved do better in school," she told her audience. "But you already know that."

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