

VALLAS: HERE'S WHY WE'RE IN THE PIAA

By PAUL VALLAS

Chief Executive Officer for the School District of Philadelphia

PHILADELPHIA - In a recent article by Ted Silary lamenting the fact that the Philadelphia Public League has joined the statewide Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Assn., he argues that our students are not talented enough to compete with teams from the rest of Pennsylvania.

Hogwash.

As to joining the PIAA, Mr. Silary wishes someone would just “show brass” and tell me, “We are not doing this. It makes no sense.” I bet the previous leaders of this inner-city school system heard that kind of bellyaching frequently – “We are not doing this. It makes no sense.”

That’s probably why only a third of our public high schools offered honors, advanced-placement or international baccalaureate classes until this year. Naysayers told us, “It makes no sense to offer challenging courses – our kids just aren’t smart enough.”

That’s probably why less than a third of our high school students took the SAT until this year. Naysayers told us, “It makes no sense for our kids to take the SAT, after all, our kids aren’t going to college.”

That’s probably why, until last year, most of the broken windows in our schools were boarded up rather than fixed. Naysayers told us, “It makes no sense to fix the windows – our kids will just break them again.”

And it’s probably why, until last year, the solution to the textbook shortage in the schools was to make sure the kids weren’t allowed to take the books home. Naysayers told us, “It makes no sense to allow the kids to take the books home – they’ll never bring them back.”

Most of my work as CEO of the public schools is about raising expectations, about convincing the world that our kids can achieve given the opportunity to do so. And joining the PIAA is just one of the many ways in which the district is raising the bar for our students.

You can’t be the state champ if you don’t play in the state championship. You can’t get into college if you don’t take the SATs, you can’t learn advance skills if you don’t enroll in honors courses, and you can’t see the world around you if your windows are boarded up with plywood.

The School District is spending more than \$10 million to upgrade athletics, including equipping 85 new teams and introducing new offerings like golf and rowing. This complements the \$1.5 billion we are spending in school construction and renovation; over \$50 million in new textbooks and supplies for a new standardized curriculum at all grade levels; and the over \$10 million to put new advanced-placement programs in all our high schools and to make sure all students take the SAT.

Three years ago, some people thought these kinds of significant investments were impossible or, worse, unwise. But we’ve proven both groups wrong by making tough budget decisions and raising new resources to drive more dollars into direct services for students – because our students are worth the extra investment.

Those who don’t believe our students are worth it should meet the Vaux Middle School chess team, the Mighty Bishops, which has won numerous state championships and two national titles.

Those who don't believe our students are worth the extra investment should tune in to School Span, the district's new student-run cable show on PSTV-Channel 52, and watch Philadelphia's next generation of writers, broadcasters, producers and power brokers in action.

Those who still don't believe our students are worth the extra investment should introduce themselves to the three West Point cadets I had the pleasure of meeting at this year's Army-Navy game – all Philadelphia public school graduates.

Joining the PIAA is not a singular event that will save Philadelphia's public school students, but it is part of a series of deliberate actions that, taken together, will raise the bar for what we believe our students, our schools and, ultimately, our city can accomplish.

Let's end the era of excuses and low expectations, and let's begin the era of champions. I know our students will continue to exceed our expectations – on the field and in the classroom.

And we are going to give our students every opportunity to prove the naysayers wrong.