

City funds sought for peer education

Dixon's budget includes no money for the program



Stadium School student Dorian Robinson (left) helps Tyrese Kwanna with math. A coalition of youth groups seeks funding so more tutors can be paid. (Sun photo by Monica Lopossay / April 23, 2008)

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A broad coalition of Baltimore youth groups is lobbying for \$3 million from Mayor Sheila Dixon to create an investment fund that would hire hundreds of 10- to 24-year-olds to educate their peers through activities such as tutoring, coaching debate and playwriting.

The coalition is trying to change the culture of a city where young people often turn to the drug trade for income and kids have to give up extracurricular activities - and sometimes school altogether - to support their families in dead-end jobs.

The City Council unanimously passed a nonbinding resolution last month urging Dixon to include the money in her budget. While Dixon applauded the goals of the coalition, called Peer to Peer Enterprises, she did not set aside any money for it and said the school system should provide the funding.

The \$3 million requested represents a significant chunk of the roughly \$14 million the city has earmarked for youth programs, and Dixon said this week that the group should not expect any money from her administration.

"We've never funded Peer to Peer," she said. "Now they've created something bigger. I think the schools need to take some responsibility [for the funding] as well."

Next fiscal year, the financially strapped school system will leave it to principals to decide what programs to fund, rather than disbursing money centrally. City schools chief Andres Alonso is strongly recommending that principals include money in their budgets for some form of peer education.

Peer to Peer is among more than a dozen organizations that come together to lobby City Hall for money every year. But unlike other programs that have received last-minute funding in past years, Peer to Peer has wound up empty-handed.

"This is students crying out for something that we all think we need, but it's not being funded, yet they're looking to solve problems among students. It doesn't make any sense," said Michele Shropshire, 22, a member of the Baltimore Algebra Project, one of about 20 youth groups in the coalition.

City Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke and other advocates on the council have vowed to try to find money for Peer to Peer, even though their power to do so is limited. The coalition is planning a daylong event Wednesday in the plaza outside City Hall, where students will perform and host workshops to demonstrate their skills.

Of the 20 youth groups participating in Peer to Peer, about 10 pay at least a few students for their work. The proposed investment fund, to be overseen by a board with student and adult representatives and administered by the Baltimore Community Foundation, would enable an expansion. Groups would submit proposals for youth work that the board would have to approve.

The \$3 million would be used to hire between 700 and 1,000 youths, who would serve between 2,000 and 6,000 of their peers, the coalition estimates. Students would work five to 20 hours per week during the school year and 10 to 35 hours a week in the summer.

"It's such an obvious opportunity to make something really great happen, and for a relatively small amount of money," said Gin Ferrara, executive director of Wide Angle Youth Media, which pays high school students for the educational videos and television shows they create.

In addition to the public money that Peer to Peer is fighting for, the coalition has raised \$85,000 in private donations.

The Baltimore Urban Debate League is eager to expand the portion of its program that employs about a dozen high school students at \$6.50 an hour to coach their middle school peers in debate.

Unchained Talent, a theater group at the Lake Clifton high school complex, wants to reward its students for their work. This weekend, the group is performing a hip-hop musical to campaign against street violence. One boy wrote and directed the show, and other students wrote the music and lyrics.

Despite Peer to Peer's intense lobbying effort, city officials say the 2009 fiscal year budget, which begins July 1, is being squeezed by increased costs and a major reduction in real estate tax

revenue. The \$2.94 billion spending plan was approved by the Board of Estimates this week and is now before the City Council.

Despite lower-than-expected revenues, the city managed to find more than \$2 million for other youth programs this week, including \$1.5 million for community schools and \$250,000 for Experience Corps, which sends senior citizens into schools. Other programs, including one that provides home visitation to expectant mothers, have received less than anticipated.

The council is expected to hold hearings on the budget next month and must approve the spending plan in June.

Proponents of peer education say the city will see a payoff among the older students sharing their knowledge and the younger ones receiving it.

One Peer to Peer member, the Youth Dreamers Homework Club at the Stadium School, employs 21 middle school students at \$6.15 an hour to tutor children in elementary school. The goal is not only to help the elementary children, but to keep the middle school students on track at a vulnerable age.

"For them to have this responsibility for another younger person is really critical in helping them to make good choices for themselves," said the group's adviser, Kristina Berdan. "They know they are role models for the younger children so they have to check their behavior."

One day after school this week, 12-year-old Daquan Langston described his afternoon tutoring a second-grader from neighboring Abbottston Elementary in math. "She thinks you can take eight from seven," the seventh-grader explained. "I try to help her realize you can't take bigger numbers from smaller numbers."

To illustrate the principles of subtraction, Daquan used a set of blocks. "She really got it when I showed her stuff she liked to play with," he said.

As for the \$18.45 he makes working three hours a week, Daquan said, "it helps me get stuff that I can use during school and pitch in with stuff my family really needs help with."