

Opinion: Opportunities for Al Tahoe reopening

By Rebecca Bryson

At the last Lake Tahoe Unified School District board meeting, board members pondered the question of whether to reopen Al Tahoe Elementary School and if so to what purpose. The proposal on the table was to reopen it as a STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art and mathematics) center and theme school.

As I read the proposal, I got excited. It sounded very forward thinking and state-of-the-art. I appreciated the inclusion of a daycare option for school employees and focusing STEAM – starting with all the preschoolers already there. However, I couldn't help but think, isn't there a way all of our elementary kids could have access to the science and technology resources described in the plan? Technology, robotics and engineering jobs are the wave of the future. These skills will be necessary for future jobs. All of our students should have the opportunity to engage in innovative science and tech activities that engage their minds, promote analytical thinking, and prepare them for the future.

In addition, hands on robotics and coding programs are the kinds of activities that get many kids excited about learning. They provide a different type of learning opportunity where kids can be collaborative, inventive and work with their hands. It is intrinsically exciting. We need that. Teachers have told me that even their lower performing students can get excited about that.

I recently led a Girl Scout meeting where the girls were earning their home scientist badge. The Environmental Magnet school kids were quick to point out that they had all done all

15 experiments already in class – whereas the Bijou kids had only ever seen one. I know the teachers at Bijou try to fit science in where they can, but they don't seem to have many resources or much support. This incident emphasized for me how deep the divide has grown. And I wonder, will another magnet school – especially one with a STEAM focus – further stratify the divide between our kids and pull science and technology resources and attention from our other schools at a time when we need them most?

The district is working to integrate the New Generation Science Standards into our curricula. This is very positive, but the students' curricula are seemingly jam packed already. The teachers will likely need extra training, resources and support. Now is the time to commit to taking our science programs to the next level for all our students.

To their credit, when these issues were raised at last week's school board meeting, the school board members and staff addressed it. They discussed how STEAM resources from the Al Tahoe project could be brought to the other schools. And, if Al Tahoe is reopened, it would free up space at the other schools to create technology centers or hands on makerspaces at each school. Another suggestion was to make Al Tahoe more of a training center to support to teachers and staff across schools. Finally, they also discussed how to make it a strong neighborhood school as well as a theme school.

We have a good group of new board members. I trust that Superintendent Jim Tarwater, the board, and staff will come up with a thoughtful plan for Al Tahoe. I hope they will continue to reach out to the public and families likely to be impacted to get input. Perhaps a survey, special session, or other type of community outreach strategy would be useful to garner public input. If you have positive solutions or options, get involved. Contact your school board representative, attend a PTA or Cafecitos meeting, or volunteer for your school site council group.

No matter what they do at Al Tahoe, however, the larger question of equity and access to opportunity for all of our kids still remains. It is a concern of many parents I know. This issue is obviously very delicate and bears further research and discussion. But we – as a community (not just as a school district) – need to grapple with it in order to ensure that we enable all our children to thrive. But that is perhaps a topic for another article. As they say, full STEAM ahead (but in a way that all can participate).

Rebecca Bryson is a member of Tahoe's Small World parent group. The mission is to create a global community of parents and families committed to ensuring a peaceful, livable, just planet for all children on Earth.