

# Not easy, but worth it

## Commentary by Beverly Ryder

Beverly Ryder left a long and successful corporate career to help revitalize the Los Angeles public schools. A member of the Civic Ventures Board of Directors, Ryder is now the school system's interim executive director of the Office of Parent and Civic Engagement.

I'd be the first to say that it's not easy making the jump from a midlife career to an encore career. I worked hard to build a career in the banking and energy industries. After college, I earned an MBA, then worked for Citibank in New York for 16 years. I moved back to Los Angeles, my hometown, and in 1992 joined Edison International. I had a variety of positions at Edison, and for the past eight years I was the corporate secretary and vice president of community involvement for Edison International and its utility subsidiary, Southern California Edison Company.

I was pleased to return to Los Angeles. It's fair to say that the Los Angeles public schools helped shape me, and I wanted to give something back. Today's L.A. public school students face a much harder journey than I did. Almost 80 percent live at or below the federal poverty level, nearly half are English-language learners, and less than half graduate from high school in our lowest income areas. It's an educational crisis, and I couldn't ignore the call for help.

That voice—that sense that I should, I could, be doing more—got louder and louder over time. I had always complemented my professional career with an active volunteer life, but as my career matured, my volunteer activities became more satisfying, and I started to think about how I might combine these two important parts of my life or switch to a more meaningful social sector career.

In 2005, Edison supported me as a loaned executive to the public school district in Los Angeles. I went to work in the Superintendent's Office and also helped out at Crenshaw High, a school for about 2,000 students in southwest Los Angeles. I worked with the principal on various projects and helped the school identify local business and community partners.

Adjusting to a new culture and career can sometimes be tiring. There are times of frustration and long hours learning new information and adjusting to a different environment. But it's not as hard as some might think. I felt a clarity of purpose and direction that certainly made it easier.

In 2006, I was accepted as a Broad Academy Fellow, a 10-month program preparing individuals from school districts, the private sector, the military, and nonprofit organizations to become urban public school superintendents. While pursuing my Broad studies, I continued to work on initiatives to involve more parents in district schools and to build

stronger business and community partnerships with local high schools. Last year, I was appointed the interim executive director of the Office of Parent and Civic Engagement.

Retiring from one career and beginning a new adventure has been an insightful and thoughtful learning experience for me. It has validated my need to give back, and the work and all the learning have energized me. Somehow, I feel that everything I've done in my life up to now has been preparation for this big step.

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The *MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures Encore Career Survey* shows that there are millions of others like me, people who have left corporate careers to find new jobs at the intersection of money and meaning. More than half of those in encore careers come from professional and management careers, 56 percent are female, most are working full time, and 30 percent have jobs in education.

That's good news for public schools in need of teachers, administrators, outside support from the community, business partnerships and more. Education is the civil rights movement of the twenty-first century. We simply cannot afford to leave as many kids behind as we have. And our hospitals, food banks, shelters, and nonprofits are equally in need of experienced boomers eager to help improve kids' lives.

Many of my contemporaries—nearly 40 million—are in the “interested in an encore career” category. They yearn for greater meaning through work and are making changes in their lives to focus on what matters most. They see the second half of life as an exciting time to start something new and create a legacy. For them, like me, retirement is not a time “to take it easy.”

Many of my friends have also made the transition from a corporate environment to a new world. They have traded a larger salary for more freedom to do work they find most fulfilling at this time in their lives, work that's more aligned with their shifting priorities.

The *Encore Career Survey* tells us that many of those who are interested in encore careers are apprehensive about the possible loss of flexibility and time off, taking a cut in pay or benefits, and the perceived difficulty in finding the right job. Those are all real and immediate concerns. I've certainly been concerned at times about the hours I'm putting in and about all the difficulties involved in launching a new career at my age.

But educating a generation of young people is more than a passion. It's a necessity. Our schools face complex challenges, and I believe that our school leaders must become innovative, nimble, out-of-the box thinkers and doers who are not afraid to take risks to make our nation's school systems globally competitive institutions.

I want to be part of this new movement of new school leaders. It's an honor, a privilege and a responsibility. And it's most certainly a worthy encore. ■