

California school reform: 'It's the teaching, stupid'

By B. Kumaravadivelu and Revathi Krishnaswamy

As the California legislative battle lines are drawn over school reform, and as attempts are being made to put the state on track to Race to the Top by seeking its share of the \$4.3 billion federal fund, what seems to be sorely missing is any informed discussion on the strategy to improve teaching.

Recognizing the importance of teaching, No Child Left Behind emphasized the improvement of teacher quality as a central objective. The same emphasis is incorporated in the rules states must follow for the Race to the Top fund. A perfect application for a grant would earn a state a total of 500 points, of which 138 points, the largest chunk, are allotted for recruiting quality teachers and for evaluating their effectiveness. States must clearly articulate innovative strategies for improving classroom teaching.

But in putting together its application, California seems to be paying no attention to classroom teaching.

Our public school systems are blessed with well-conceived curricula, well-designed textbooks and well-constructed tests. The weakest link in this educational chain is classroom teaching.

Our conversations with teachers, parents and students associated with top public schools in the South Bay reveal a clear pattern: They are all concerned about what actually happens in the classroom.

Burdened with large classes, limited resources and loathsome paperwork, teachers are not able to give their full attention to teaching. They spend a substantial amount of class time conducting tests, with little time left for giving students sufficient practice or feedback. They bitterly complain that in a system where only test scores matter, teaching takes a back seat.

Wary and weary of ineffective classroom teaching, many parents have turned to parallel schooling at home, helping their children with homework and preparing them for tests.

"Teachers have outsourced teaching," observed one parent who works for the IT industry. He helps his daughter with her math and science but has hired a tutor for reading, at a considerable cost.

Faced with a never-ending battery of tests and a bewildering array of homework, students in these top public schools are desperate for help.

"I like working with my math tutor," says a student. "She takes time to explain difficult concepts." Many say that in school, they simply keep taking tests and worrying about grades but don't get enough opportunities to learn from their mistakes.

If the South Bay's leading public schools are unable to maximize learning opportunities, it is not surprising that others lag even further behind.

The teacher quality requirement, defined narrowly in terms of student performance in standardized tests, has come as a boon for the testing companies and tutoring centers. It has disproportionately affected students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly minority students, who cannot afford private tutors.

If we are serious about improving instruction in our public schools, we need to devise an effective in-service program that will help teachers develop the knowledge and skill necessary to observe, analyze and evaluate their own teaching. This will help them measure and improve their teaching effectiveness on a continual basis.

California can compete more effectively for top dollars by articulating a comprehensive strategy for teachers to improve their everyday practice of teaching. As legislators and negotiators wrangle over parental freedom, charter school accountability and other issues, they should remind themselves, "It's the teaching, stupid."

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