**Fixing California's Dropout Problem Requires a Big Picture Solution**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *By Marty Hittelman**President**California Federation of Teachers*The news that the California Department of Education has recalibrated its method of calculating high school drop out rates is welcome and the revised totals are disturbing. Accurate numbers are a necessary beginning for addressing solutions. It is unacceptable for nearly a quarter of all high school students to drop out, and we must collectively find a way to keep students in school. But to do that we must first acknowledge the issues that cause them to drop out. |  |

It is unfortunate that the anti-public school ideologues are exploiting this news to bash the schools. Public schools remain the foundation of our democracy. When the schools are in trouble, so are the shared values of our society and our future. The solution is to fix what's wrong, and one thing stands out.

California schools rank 46th in the nation in per student funding. We are last in the country in high school counselors, school nurses, and school librarians per student. No wonder students often can't receive the personal support they urgently need. Years of inadequate public school funding have reduced after school programs, sports, music, and clubs-- just the kinds of extracurricular activities that are crucial to retention.

We've also done a disservice to these students by over-testing them. The current No Child Left Behind regimen has taken the joy out of learning for teachers and students alike. No Child Left Behind has forced teachers to teach to the test, devote way too much class time to test-taking strategies, and pay too little attention to other activities that motivate and encourage students to learn. In addition, we lose nearly 50% of our new teachers in their first five years, because we underpay them and don't give them enough support with mentoring and peer assistance.

Then there are the problems that don't originate with schools, but have an enormous impact on them. One reason losing a quarter of the students is disastrous is because we have nowhere for them to go. Three decades ago dropout numbers were no different, but they didn't produce the intense outcry of today. Why? Because our economy generated factory jobs with decent salaries and benefits that could support a middle class lifestyle, even without a high school diploma. Today dropouts no longer have this option.

The recalibrated dropout numbers should serve as a warning bell that we must address the funding issue. We need fair tax policies that ask the people that have benefited the most from California's education system to help out. Bring the top state income tax bracket back to what it was under Fete Wilson (from 9.3 to 11 percent, on people who make more than $300,000 per year) and we gain $5 billion a year. Close egregious corporate tax loopholes, like the one that lets oil companies pay no tax on extraction (California is the only state of 21 oil producing states with no extraction tax), and that's billions more.

I

We can fund education properly, and we can do a better job keeping kids in school. We just have to understand these things are linked, and get our priorities right to do something about it. Increased funding and transforming our tunnel vision testing mentality will not overcome all the obstacles to high school completion that students face for high school completion, but they are absolute preconditions.

*Marty Hittelman is the elected President of the California Federation of Teachers (CFT) which is a member of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The CFT represents faculty and other school employees in public and private schools and colleges, from early childhood through higher education.*

Posted on July 29, 2008 in Califomia Progress Report