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Monday, October 3, 2005

GUEST EDITORIAL: A new tool develops in tracking school money



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Accountability and transparency of public school finances advanced a step this week with a new bill signed into law by the California governor.

It's SB687 by state Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto. It requires that, beginning with the fall 2006-07 school year, "estimated per-pupil expenditures" and "an average of salaries paid to" teachers at each public school and charter school be tallied and reported.

This is an improvement from what was required by Proposition 98, which voters passed in 1988. In practice, Prop. 98 required only an estimate by each district of how much was spent in each school. The estimate usually was based on the average of districtwide teacher salaries. So the Prop. 98-based report to parents and taxpayers was not as detailed as the new bill requires.

Prop. 98 did at least initiate some financial reporting; before Prop. 98 there was no financial accountability requirement at all.

Now, with SB687, parents and other citizens will be able to compare "spending per pupil and average teacher salaries on a school-by-school basis," Sen. Simitian told us. This will show whether high per-classroom spending and high teacher salaries "are clustered throughout the state," and where.

Although votes for the bill came from both parties, its main support came from liberal groups such as Education-Trust West. That's because these groups want to show the disparities in funding within districts between lower-performing inner-city schools that usually have newer,

lower-paid teachers and higher-performing schools that usually have older, more-experienced teachers, Steven Frates said; he's senior fellow at the Rose Institute of state and local Government at Claremont McKenna College.

There's a danger that this data will be used to force high-paid teachers with experience into inner-city schools, Mr. Frates said, warning that the strategy could backfire in that such teachers will simply move to other districts with safer schools.

What's needed, Mr. Frates said, is even greater disclosure of where the money goes, not only salaries, as required by SB687, but total benefits, including medical insurance and retirement contributions.

In some states, the salaries and benefits of individual teachers are disclosed to the public that pays them.

When asked whether additional disclosure is needed, Sen. Simitian told us, "Let's see what we learn from this next step," meaning SB687.

But the children shouldn't wait. SB687 should be a stepping stone to more disclosure reforms when the Legislature gets back to business in January.

The Orange County Register

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