

# Opinion: California's achievement gap needs more than money

By Dan Walters

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Gov. Jerry Brown's awkwardly named Local Control Funding Formula is aimed, he says, at closing the wide academic achievement gap between poor and/or "English-learner" students and more privileged kids.

The LCFF pumps more money into districts with large numbers of the targeted students on the assumption – or hope – that it will translate into more intensive educational attention and therefore better academic outcomes.

It's a concrete expression – and therefore a test – of the Capitol's larger assumption that more money will cure educational shortcomings.

However, improving the educations of underprivileged youngsters involves more – much more – than simply spending additional money, even if it is focused.

A clue is found in Superior Court Judge George Hernandez Jr.'s order that state education officials, including newly re-elected Superintendent Tom Torlakson, intervene in Los Angeles' Jefferson High School, where students have been just sitting around, or been sent home, because administrators had bollixed up class schedules for weeks.

Hernandez declared that students "have suffered and continue to suffer severe and pervasive educational deprivations" because of "Jefferson's failure to provide the students with appropriate course schedules."

This wasn't a lack of money; this was an abject failure of the adults who run the 600,000-student Los Angeles Unified School District to do their jobs for those they are supposed to be serving.

This foul-up would never happen at an upscale high school in a white neighborhood. But it could and did happen at a mostly nonwhite high school in a poor neighborhood, depriving its students of much-needed class time.

Hernandez's ruling comes on the heels of another judge's declaration that the state's teacher-tenure system deprives poor and nonwhite students of their constitutional rights to equal educations. And the underlying effects of this institutional malaise are found in a new report from UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA).

UCLA researchers surveyed teachers in California high schools split into three groups – low-poverty, low- and mixed-poverty, and high-poverty – based on the incidence of free or reduced-price lunches (the same measure used by the LCFF).

They found that in high-poverty schools, "learning time is undermined by problems with school facilities, lack of access to school libraries and technology, and insufficient qualified substitute teachers."

Those schools also experience more turnover, more teacher absences and other factors that undermine instructional time.

Spending more money on poor kids is fine – if the money gets to them. But there's clearly more to the equation than just money, and Brown, et al., should not claim that the LCFF truly addresses the issue.

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