

EDITORIAL: Does local control set a path to academic excellence? Only time will tell



Student Mariah Morez works with classmates in the Recat Women's League class at Fowler High School. The class helps female students at the school learn leadership skills and plan their college careers.

CRAIG KOHLRUSS — THE FRESNO BEE [Buy Photo](#)

When it comes right down to it, success or failure in politics rests on the art of persuasion.

And Gov. Jerry Brown convinced the state Legislature in 2013 that giving school districts more money to help poor students, those learning English and those in foster care will pay off big — not just for students but our state, too.

Long Beach Unified School District Superintendent Chris Steinhauser is among those who believe that Brown is on the right track. He says that if this new way of distributing tax dollars to schools elevates the classroom performance of at-risk kids, it could be the governor's crowning achievement.

"It's an economic development issue," Steinhauser told Bee associate editor Gail Marshall this summer. "It's a security issue for the state as well as the nation. Every kid that we make sure is college and career ready, that is one less student who has the potential of going to prison, going on welfare, becoming unemployed. That has huge ramifications for tax revenues."

Fresnans and residents of other Valley communities should recognize the wisdom of Steinhauser's words as well as anyone. The Valley is one of America's great melting pots. It attracts immigrants to its fertile agricultural fields and

others looking for a place to succeed.

But getting the education and training crucial to success has proven to be a high hurdle for many Valley children — especially for those from impoverished or broken homes, or those who speak a foreign language. As dropout rates increased, so did the challenges for Valley cities. Gangs grew. Crime soared. And middle-class families fled from their old neighborhoods in search of safer places to live and better schools for their kids.

Now the hope is that Brown's new approach to funding K-12 education will result in fewer dropouts, a more highly skilled workforce and revitalized cities. That is a lot to ask — and it's a reminder that in both politics and education almost every new idea is oversold.

People, of course, are in a hurry. They want better results now. And they see this new funding strategy — dubbed the Local Control Funding Formula — and the accompanying decision to let local communities decide how to spend the extra dollars — as a chance to make big changes in schools.

"They're investing in staff, which means restoring positions, and then for the most part, making one or two bets, a couple of new things they're going to do, instead of wholesale change," Carrie Hahnel, director of research and policy analysis at The Education Trust-West, an Oakland-based nonprofit, told The Bee's Hannah Furfaro.

"We've been discouraged by the lack of invention and creativity this year ... strangely, we have a different formula but districts seem to be doing things mostly the same."

We're OK with that — for now.

The Great Recession whittled away at staffs, so it makes perfect sense to restore positions. And each new teacher and counselor on campus can connect with a struggling student and show them the possibilities if they work hard and seek the help they need.

In addition, it's difficult to track exactly what is — and isn't working — when wholesale change is made. Better to start small, keep a close watch, jettison those strategies that don't pay off and invest heavily later in those that work.

Fresno Unified, for example, has added 30 minutes of class time daily in 10 elementary schools with high numbers of at-risk students. The district previously saw good results from longer days at its three "turnaround" schools: Yosemite Middle, Carver Academy and Webster Elementary.

About \$1.9 million is being used to expand the district's community day school, \$2.1 million is going to additional school counselors and child-welfare specialists, and \$400,000 to hire four social workers to assist foster and homeless students.

It is essential that Fresno Unified and other districts with high concentrations of at-risk students rely on hard data — not anecdotal evidence — in analyzing the effectiveness of their investments.

Everyone has ideas about what will work. And everyone has things they would rather do or not do. The focus must be on what actually engages students, supports achievement and best prepares them for college or a job with a livable wage.

One more thing: patience.

Superintendents and school board members should listen to their communities, as well as check out what works well in other districts.

Teachers should keep open minds. "New" is not always synonymous with "bad."

Most of all, the Legislature should refrain from needless meddling.

Let's give the Local Control Funding Formula a few years and see how things go before touting The Next Big Fix for Education.

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