

Opinion: California education reform may be facing a Brownout

By Larry Sand

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Across the country, governors have become serious about education reform. New Jersey's Chris Christie and Florida's Rick Scott are leading the charge for eliminating teacher tenure, instituting merit pay and focusing on accountability and efficiency.

Many in California were hoping that Gov. Jerry Brown would follow in their footsteps, turn his back on his longtime political crony -- the California Teachers Association -- and initiate reform that would benefit both the children and taxpayers.

But that has not happened.

Brown could have supported a voucher or scholarship program that would allow students to take some public money and go to a private school. For many parents, especially low-income and disadvantaged parents whose children are often subject to the lowest-performing public schools, these programs offer their children a chance to receive a quality education. Taxpayers also save money because many private schools educate children for considerably less money than public schools do.

He could have promoted the expansion of charter schools. These are public schools that typically do as well if not better than traditional public schools and in California spend only 69 percent of what traditional schools do, according to the Center for Education Reform.

He could have shown support for California's new Parent Trigger law by letting Ben Austin remain on the state school board. Instead, he removed Austin, executive director of Parent Revolution, the organization behind the new law that enables parents at poorly performing schools to sign a petition that could ultimately force a change in school governance.

Other reforms would have given us a lot more bang for the money we do spend. Brown could have championed a change in state law that would eliminate tenure and seniority rules, thus making it easier for local districts to maintain the most effective teachers and rid themselves of the poorest -- and frequently highly paid -- performers.

But Brown has done nothing in the way of reform. In fact, he went in the opposite direction. When he released his 2011 budget on Jan. 10, K-12 education went untouched, and there was no mention of reform.

The coup de grace came when he fired all the members of the California State Board of Education, which included prominent education reformers like Austin, and replaced them with a group that has no history of reform including Patricia Ann Rucker, a former California Teachers Association lobbyist.

Not surprisingly, CTA President David Sanchez said his union was "thrilled" by the new appointees because he believed the board had been stacked with too many members connected to charters, which are mostly nonunion.

It cannot be emphasized enough how different the CTA's agenda is from that of parents and taxpayers. While the latter want the best education for children delivered with quality and efficiency, the teachers union's primary goal is to preserve as many CTA dues-paying members' jobs as possible, thereby maintaining their status as the most powerful political player in California.

The main thrust of their power is used to exert maximum political pressure on state legislators to stave off any reform that would benefit our public schools.

So, despite all his talk about tough measures for tough times, it seems that this is the same old Jerry Brown doing the bidding of the 325,000-member CTA. A close look at his budget and his choices for school board says that he is still an old-school politician, unwilling to buck the teachers unions. That kids, parents and taxpayers are suffering doesn't seem to appear on his radar.

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