



MISSISSIPPIIFICATION OF CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS

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By Peter Schrag

--There's little in last week's lawsuit about the wretched state of the schools that many of California's poorest children are forced to attend that wasn't known before -- the shortage of trained teachers; the lack of adequate textbooks, and sometimes of any textbooks; the dilapidated and overcrowded classrooms; the filthy toilets; the falling ceiling tiles; the broken seats; the kids trying to hear teachers over the noise of other activities in the same space. But that makes the allegations in this suit all the more scandalous and the posture of the defendants all the more indefensible. How can something that everybody ought to know only too well -- the local districts, the state Department of Education, the governor, the Legislature -- be tolerated year after year, decade after decade?

The suit, filed by the American Civil Liberties Union, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund and other organizations, names the state, the state Department of Education, state schools Superintendent Delaine Eastin and the state Board of Education as defendants.

Conspicuously missing from that list are the local districts and the governor, who has made himself the central figure in California education. On the day the suit was filed, the governor's office conveniently referred all questions to Eastin, thereby reinforcing the contention of ACLU counsel Mark Rosenbaum: Many people are complicit, he said, but "the buck stops nowhere."

The suit's central argument rests on the contention that the state, which has the "primary role in governance of the school system," has failed dismally in providing adequate resources for its poorest children to learn, much less equal resources.

"Although the state has established academic standards that students must meet," it says, "the state has failed to meet its responsibility to ensure that schools provide teachers who are adequately trained, has failed to provide sufficient materials to enable students to have a reasonable chance to pass tests that measure their performance and has failed to provide facilities in which students can safely learn the materials they need to meet state-mandated standards."

Although the legal theory of the case follows a line of "adequacy" suits in other states where the courts have ordered resources for poor and minority students upgraded -- teachers, buildings, books -- what Rosenbaum no doubt would prefer is a negotiated political solution. And that political case is no doubt more promising than the long and complicated path that a legal resolution is certain to require. The named plaintiffs include some 60 students in 20 schools in Fresno, Los Angeles, Oakland, San Francisco, Richmond and other districts, all of them attended by large proportions of black, Latino and poor students, but they represent a class that includes hundreds of thousands of others.

Do state officials really want to come into court arguing that the conditions in those schools are acceptable, that students there have just as good a chance to get a good education as those in schools that have adequate facilities? Will they want to argue that it makes no difference whether every child has a textbook from the first day, whether there are science laboratories and library books?

Will they say there is no problem if two classes are jammed into the same room or into the corner of an auditorium or into rooms where, because of the lack of air conditioning, the temperature rises to more than 90 degrees day after spring day or where, because of the lack of a working heating system, kids sit in coats and hats to keep from freezing? Will they contend that it's of no consequence that in some classes kids have a dozen teachers, few of them trained, during the same school year? Rosenbaum calls it "the Mississippification of California schools."

Gov. Gray Davis is not to blame for those conditions. They've been festering for decades. But as a man who says education is his top priority, it would be hard to argue that he bears no responsibility for fixing them. Yet so far he's stoutly resisted even elementary efforts to single out the worst schools for special help. And while officials may contend that in appropriating more money from California's booming economy they've begun to address the problems of resources, so far almost nothing has been done to address the glaring inadequacies of the poorest schools.

The state flies the flag of accountability, meaning better test scores for students and higher average scores for schools. But the state has constantly ducked its accountability for the problems of those particular schools. Like a lot of other politicians, the governor likes nothing better than a classroom photo-op with bright-looking kids. When will he bring the cameras into one of Rosenbaum's schools, to a filthy toilet or a row of broken seats or to a shuttered library with books that went out of date a generation ago or to a room full of sweltering kids, and say. "This is unacceptable in a decent society"?

Although Rosenbaum didn't name the individual districts, they surely bear a large share of the responsibility for the bureaucratic indifference, and sometimes the corruption, that keeps the books - for which the state has been appropriating tons of money -- from the kids, and that tolerate untenable and sometimes dangerous conditions. California's system begs for the buck-passing that Rosenbaum complains about. But it's the state that's ultimately responsible. Maybe sooner or later, someone will be embarrassed enough to get it.

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