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Increasing Student Achievement in California Will Require Fundamental Overhaul of How Schools Are Run and Financed, Bipartisan-Commissioned Reports Show

Studies Reveal More Education Dollars Will Yield Few Results Without Significant Reforms

SACRAMENTO — California schools are in need of sweeping, comprehensive reforms if the state is to raise the quality of education and student-achievement rates, according to a long-awaited research project that rigorously assesses how K-12 schools are governed and financed. The structural problems are so deep-seated that more funding and small, incremental interventions are unlikely to make a difference unless matched with a commitment to wholesale reform.

The 22 studies, requested by a bipartisan group of state policy-makers, will be released in two parts this week. The first half was unveiled in Sacramento today by Stanford University researchers, state lawmakers and representatives from the foundations that underwrote the nearly \$3 million project. Tomorrow, the second release will focus on projected cost estimates for providing a quality education for California's 6.8 million school-age children.

“One of the key questions we were asked to address in these studies was, ‘What does California school finance and governance look like today?’” said Susanna Loeb, an associate professor at Stanford University and the leader of the *Getting Down to Facts* research project. “We found a very conclusive answer: California's K-12 system is in need of significant overhaul. Creating high achievement standards and strong standards-based assessment and accountability systems are a good start, but fundamental governance reforms are still needed.”

“Today's studies need to be taken very seriously by everyone in the education debate,” said Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. “If we hope to give our children the world-class education they deserve, then we need real education reform. I have long advocated for more transparency in our schools, more flexibility for our education leaders, and more information for our parents. This is just a starting point for what I hope will be a renewed focus in the Legislature on increasing student achievement with needed reform.”

“These sobering findings serve as a wake-up call for all of us — politicians, business leaders and educators alike,” said State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell, one of the research requestors. “The message from this research is clear: we're going to have to roll up our sleeves and find a way forward together if we are to return California's once-celebrated education system back to excellence. Our children deserve nothing less.”

The studies were designed to provide policy-makers and other education stakeholders with a baseline understanding of how California's schools are financed and governed — from how education is

delivered and assessed in the classroom to how effectively resources are allocated. Among the key findings:

- *The current finance system is deeply flawed and contributes to the problem.* Funding gaps across districts are substantial and haphazard, with no regard to costs, student needs or meeting state goals. There is no coherent rationale for why schools serving similar student populations in similar locations receive different funding amounts.
- *California's education system is not making the most effective use of its current resources.* This is true across a broad range of categories, from the irrational and ineffective distribution of resources across districts and schools to how staff time is allocated and the lack of transparency and evaluation.
- *California's schools may need more resources to meet student-achievement goals, but, to have an impact, increased funding must go hand-in-hand with reforms.* New investments in education are likely to benefit students only if they are accompanied by significant and systemic reforms directed at fixing our schools' troubled finance and governance system.
- *Highly prescriptive finance and governance policies thwart local schools and districts in their efforts to meet the needs of their students and promote higher achievement.* When asked about which changes would be most important to help them improve outcomes for students, principals ranked less paperwork requirements and more flexibility in allocating resources as more important than most other factors.
- *Current teacher policies do not let state and local administrators make the best use of the pool of potential teachers or adequately support current teachers.* Teachers are essential to student success, but current policies related to hiring, training, retaining and dismissing teachers are not designed to optimize student learning or the quality of the teacher workforce. One factor that emerged most consistently across studies as inhibiting local leadership was the difficulty in dismissing ineffective teachers. However, principals and superintendents indicate that they would only seek to remove a small number of teachers — two or fewer in most schools — if they had the actual authority to do so.
- *California must do a better job of tracking educational data and sharing knowledge.* We lag behind other states in collecting useful information on students' learning, teachers and the effectiveness of educational programs and operations. Moreover, reforms have not been designed in ways that allow California's citizens and policy-makers to learn from experience about how to best design and implement policy. Basic data on such things as the learning patterns of students across grades and programs are currently absent. These data are essential for measuring progress and developing reforms, and any reform without investing in better data is unlikely to succeed.

“The bipartisan effort that led to this study and the bipartisan efforts that have led to California having the highest educational standards in the country give me confidence that a bipartisan blueprint can be drawn from these findings that can help all California students meet those standards,” said Fabian Núñez, Speaker of the California State Assembly and a researcher requestor. “Those of us who requested these studies are still in the process of digesting them, and I am committed to ensuring that the parents, teachers, and business and community leaders, who all have such a big stake in our education system, receive and review this information as well. On an immediate basis, I have asked the Chair of the Assembly Education Committee to ensure that all legislation coming through that committee be viewed through the prism of these important findings.”

“If we do not get our house in order by making significant reforms to the state’s governance and finance systems, I fear that new resources will make little difference,” said Marshall Smith, Education Program Director of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

While public debate on education has tended to focus on placing a price tag on efforts to turn California’s schools around, these studies underscore the importance of first taking a probing look at how schools function on existing resources as a path to identifying key reforms that should play into any cost-estimate analyses.

“Any effort to improve California’s public school system must begin with solid research and the engagement of a bipartisan group of leaders from across the state,” said Anne Stanton, Youth Program Director at The James Irvine Foundation. “These studies provide our state’s leaders with the necessary tools to begin fixing our education system. What they need most of all now is the political will to make the tough choices and find a way forward. California’s children are counting on them.”

“The Committee is grateful for the *Getting Down to Facts* research, which will inform our work directly,” said Ted Mitchell, Chair of the Governor’s Committee on Education Excellence. “Today’s major findings clearly reinforce the committee’s view, and that of many Californians, that the system is broken and there is no single lever you can pull to fix it. It is very clear that we have to take a holistic view of the problem. Reform must be fundamental, systemic, and coherent. This kind of reform will not come easily or quickly, but it must be done.”

“Significant improvement in California’s educational system will require a shared commitment state-wide,” said Steve Seleznow, program director for education, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. “The willingness of state leaders to request these reports and consider key findings is a strong first step toward providing educators and students with the support they need to meet high expectations and achieve greater results.”

The next series of studies estimating the cost of providing a quality education in California will be released tomorrow, March 15, 2007, at the following events:

9:30a.m.: Sacramento news conference — Room 1190, State Capitol Building

11:30a.m.: Telephone news conference — Number: 800-795-1259; Passcode: STANFORD

About *Getting Down to Facts*

Getting Down to Facts includes 22 studies by more than 30 researchers from the nation’s leading universities and research institutions. It was formally requested by a bipartisan group of state leaders, including State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell, Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez, Senate President pro Tem Don Perata, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Committee on Educational Excellence and former Education Secretary Alan Bersin. Funding support was provided by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The James Irvine Foundation and The Stuart Foundation. To view the full set of studies released today, visit <http://irepp.stanford.edu/>.

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