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Hemphill: The sad state of California's public schools

Allen Polk Hemphill
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I understand that in this economic crisis, school districts are laying off teachers, but can anyone tell me why we keep California teachers at all? Of course, the problem is not all the teachers' fault – but it is all their responsibility and I have not heard of the powerful teachers unions — the most powerful unions in the state — calling for reforms to solve the academic problem.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Allen Polk Hemphill

Analyzing the 72-page federal report of periodic testing from the U.S. Department of Education (called the National Report Card) is an exercise in reality. (<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2009/2010458.pdf>) The current report tested reading and math skills in 50 states, D.C. and the overseas Department of Defense schools.

The good news is that California scored higher in fourth-grade reading than Louisiana and New Mexico.

The bad news is that California scored lower than Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia...well, everyone else.

The eighth-grade reading results were terrible: We tied with Louisiana and beat only Mississippi.

In math, we tested 45th at the fourth-grade, and 46th at the fifth-grade among all states.

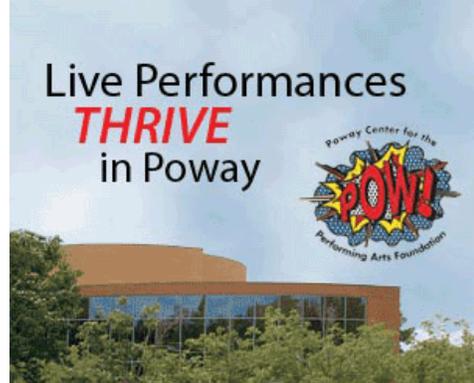
California has a disproportionate number of "English Learners" – and that holds back our test scores, but that is the fault of the very state and federal governments that also run the schools.

It is not the fault of the students who attend the schools — who pay academically for the existence of English Learners by being held back while the "Learners" try to catch up.

It is not the fault of the parents, who pay for the schools — schools which have the highest paid teachers in the nation.

The study notes many "excuses" for those who wish to excuse poor performance. The percentage of students who get subsidized lunches in each state, for example, shows some states have students from poor economic situations in disproportionate numbers. The statistics are broken down for states that have different percentages of disabled. The statistics are also broken down for male, female, and several racial groups (White/Black/Latino).

Parents, however, are interested in the general climate in which their children learn – and the final standings take into account all of those factors.



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Rationalize if you wish. The final numbers are the final numbers. We don't rationalize scores in baseball, football, or business bottom lines as to the racial/economic makeup of the employees or the customers in determining success or failure.

Taking into account all of the factors — as you would in any other sport or business — California fails.

The education establishment tries to stop everything from being measured, or the measurement publicized. The government education establishment believes it hurts the "self esteem" of the students at the bottom end, it certainly hurts the teachers and administrators at the bottom end, and California is at the bottom end.

Why California parents pay top dollar for bottom-level academic performance is a mystery, but perhaps in this era of limited tax money it is time to seriously examine this failing government education turkey.

(Private and Catholic schools in California scored the equivalent of 20-plus states higher than public schools.)

Reach Hemphill at ahemphill@cox.net.



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