

San Jose Mercury News

September 23, 2009

Teacher data bill veto would be a mistake

The highest barrier to California's getting its fair share of \$4 billion in federal "Race to the Top" education grants is a 2006 law that prohibits linking teacher evaluations to student test scores. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has made California's ban a national laughing stock. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proclaimed that it must go.

A bill eliminating the barrier, SB19, authored by state Sen. Joe Simitian (D-Palo Alto), is on the governor's desk. But amazingly, he may not sign it. Schwarzenegger wants additional reforms as well, and some Republicans feel eliminating

the data problem will leave less incentive for lawmakers to deal with the rest of the package.

Some of the other ideas are reasonable, but none comes close to the data problem as a solid impediment to federal dollars at a time when the governor and Legislature are failing to adequately fund public schools. A veto of SB19 would be a terrible mistake, reinforcing in the minds of Duncan and President Barack Obama that California's educational priorities are skewed and unworthy of federal support. Schwarzenegger should sign SB19 and pursue his other reforms next year based on their merits.

CALIFORNIA CHRONICLE

October 13, 2009

Governor Signs Simitian's Education Data Bill, Ensuring Access to Federal Funds

SACRAMENTO – Sunday Governor Schwarzenegger signed into law Senate Bill 19, by State Senator Joe Simitian (D-Palo Alto), which ensures California's eligibility to compete for \$4.5 billion in federal school funding. The bill puts to rest a controversy Simitian describes as "a tempest in a teapot" over California's eligibility for the federal "Race to the Top" funds.

Senate Bill 19 strengthens California's education data system, which will enable education officials to accurately track student performance and ensure funds are being wisely spent. The bill also clarifies an existing state law concerning how the data can be used.

Although Simitian and others, including State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell, argued that the feds were misreading the state law, Simitian said he quickly concluded it was wiser to simply "eliminate, rather than prolong the debate."

"My goal was to make this a non-issue as quickly as possible," said Simitian. "Now, California can compete for our fair share of federal funding, and make more informed choices for our schools and our kids."

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell praised the new law as a win for reform efforts. "The 'Race to the Top' competition has the potential to usher in a period of bold and far-reaching structural reform of our nation's K-12 public education system," said O'Connell. "Senate Bill 19 will help California move more quickly into having the right conversation about how to use data to make informed and targeted decisions that will have a great impact on improving student achievement."

Specifically, SB 19 will do the following:

- Delete existing language in state law which could be deemed by the federal government as preventing the use of pupil data in teacher assignment and evaluation.
- Provide clarity about system linkages between K-12 and pre-K, and between K-12 and higher education, to ensure the state's longitudinal data system is P-20 comprehensive per the federal requirements.
- Codify the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to ensure the state's data system complies with federal funding requirements.

SB 19 is Simitian's latest piece of legislation to develop a statewide database for education, and builds on prior work that he laughingly describes as "boring, but important." His first effort, SB 687 (2005), increased the information that school districts share in their annual School Accountability Report Cards (SARC) to include spending per school and per student.

The following year, Simitian's SB 1614 (2006) created a comprehensive statewide teacher workforce database to reveal, among other things, which programs improve student performance, and which ones don't; as well as how many teachers in which disciplines our schools will need in the coming years. Then, in 2008, Simitian's SB 1298 set the stage for the development of a truly comprehensive P-20 longitudinal statewide system.

"Given that we're never going to have all the money we want to educate kids in California, it's all the more important that we make smart, well informed decisions," said Simitian. "Whether your first priority is careful use of taxpayer dollars or a first-rate education for our kids, we need to know how to spend our limited funds most effectively."

"Every school year, on behalf of six million school kids, we spend tens of billions of dollars," Simitian added. "We need to know what works, and what doesn't."

Earlier this month, Simitian traveled to Washington D.C. to discuss California's eligibility for the 'Race to the Top' program. Simitian met with U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education Russlynn Ali and other key U.S. Department of Education officials.