California's public schools were among the most admired in the country until 20 years of disinvestment and teaching fads drove them into the ground. The decline announced itself dramatically in the mid-90's, when a succession of disastrous performances on national tests placed California's children at or near the bottom of the country in reading, math and science. The slippage has national implications, given that one in every nine public-school children in the United States is enrolled in California. The shock of dismal test scores has propelled the governor and the legislature into a frenzy of reform that has committed more than $7 billion and touched on every aspect of public education.

But the lack of a blueprint for this deluge of new mandates has left many districts paralyzed and uncertain how to proceed. Worse yet, a civil rights lawsuit filed last month by the Southern California Civil Union, the governor and the legislature need to concentrate on the basics in education -- books, a teacher and a place to sit. To get homework and they get to take their books home.

A.C.L.U. lawsuits were "helpful because they galvanize public attention." But as California's chief advocate of education, Mr. Davis has the power to put these inequalities on the public agenda. He made a courageous decision by pledging not to run for re-election unless reading scores go up. He also fought to win performance bonuses for accomplished teachers -- making it clear that the state values them. But he should also commit himself to ensuring that every schoolchild in the state has textbooks, a teacher and a place to sit. To build a reform, he needs to start with a foundation and move up.