

Editorial Observer/BRENT STAPLES

## The 'Mississippification' of California Schools

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 makes the case that this chaotic reform effort could deepen educational inequality by raising standards without providing the necessary resources to meet them, leaving poor districts even further behind the rich ones than they are today.

The trouble dates back to Proposition 13 and the tax revolt of the 1970's, which savaged support for the public universities, children's programs and, most tragically, the public schools. Peter Schrag, a columnist for The Sacramento Bee, angered some Californians last month

### How education reform can stumble for lack of a clear blueprint.

when he described the decline as "Mississippification," arguing that rich, historically literate California had fallen to the level of a poor Southern state that has long been identified with poor schools and high rates of illiteracy.

Californians balked at the comparison, but the state's schools do in fact lag behind Mississippi's in a few categories while besting them narrowly in a few others. Low-income children in Mississippi are more likely to have a fully certified teacher than are low-income children in California. In addition, California's fourth graders lag behind Mississippi on the federally sponsored reading test known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

In the mid 90's, Gov. Pete Wilson reacted to voter outrage by forcing through legislation that mandated smaller class sizes without building more schools or increasing the teacher supply. The resulting teacher shortage forced the schools to hire largely unqualified instructors.

Citing unfortunate outcomes like this one, Policy Analysis for California Education, an influential research institute run jointly by Stanford Uni-

versity and the University of California at Berkeley, has called for a moratorium on school legislation until the state issues a plan for coordinating the "onslaught of new mandates."

The current governor, Gray Davis, inherited the school system's problems in 1999 and is placing great emphasis on cash rewards for schools whose students read the most pages. In a recent interview, Mr. Davis spoke excitedly of teachers who got their students to read more by promising to dye their hair green, lie down with snakes or bathe in pools of Jell-O. But given the civil rights suit, filed last month by the Southern California branch of the American Civil Liberties Union, the governor and the legislature need to concentrate on the basic necessities of schooling — books, classrooms and teachers — before they talk up gimmicks.

The legislature has ordered a new curriculum and new high school exit exams, but according to the A.C.L.U. lawsuit has failed to deal with the fact that many schools in the state lack books. The suit charges the state with denying tens of thousands of children the basic public education to which the State Constitution entitles them.

The depositions taken for this suit from teachers and students should be required reading for every Californian. For lack of teachers and classrooms, thousands of California's children are consigned to "classes" in which they get school

credit for running errands for the teachers and staff.

In school after school, there are so few textbooks that students are forbidden to take books home. A science teacher at a middle school assigns his children to count stars for homework instead of working from textbooks that are collected at the end of every class.

The most heartbreaking affidavit comes from 12-year-old Silas Moutrie, a seventh grader at the Luther Burbank Middle School in San Francisco, who writes: "You can't take books home because we don't have enough. . . . Instead we have to come to class to do the same thing we could have done at home. We're probably behind other schools because they get homework and they get to take their books home."

Governor Davis said that the 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.