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Bill would require schools to list costs of salaries

GOAL IS TO GIVE PARENTS ANOTHER MEASURING TOOL, SUPPORTERS SAY

By S.L. Wykes
Mercury News

Parents who want to know just how much their children's schools are spending on teachers may soon have a way to find out.

A bill written by state Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, would require school districts to include teachers' salary costs by individual school in the accountability report cards the state requires districts to provide to the public.

Those report cards now list teacher salaries as averages for whole districts.

Simitian said Monday that the bill, SB 687, "is simplicity itself. . . . It's simply about transparency." And, he said, it answers a simple question: "Where are we spending our dollars in terms of salaries?"

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell joined Simitian on Monday at a press conference in Sacramento to offer his support for the bill. "What we need to have is basic information about what's being spent," O'Connell said.

A recent report by the Education Trust-West showed that what districts spend on teachers' salaries can vary widely when student populations are sorted by income or ethnicity. The state's 50 biggest school districts spend more on teachers who work in schools with the lowest numbers of African-American and Latino students.

O'Connell said Simitian's bill would help point up such inequities by making it easier to see how much districts spend on teachers on a school-by-school basis.

"Teachers are the single most important factor in improving student achievement," said John Affeldt, managing attorney for Public Advocates, who also spoke in support of the bill at the Simitian press conference. He was the lead attorney in the Williams vs. California case, whose settlement requires the state to address the inequities in learning conditions for students of color and low-income students.

The California Teachers Association has not yet taken a position on the bill.

Local parents and school districts applauded the school report card changes in Simitian's bill, but cautioned that money doesn't tell the whole story. "Should teachers' salaries be divulged?" asked Beverly Lozoff, Parent Teacher Student Association president at Homestead High School in Cupertino. "Absolutely!"

But, she added, "The schools my children have attended are not the highest-paying districts," and yet their reputation as good schools is statewide, she said. "The equation that higher salaries equals better education is not necessarily true."

San Jose Unified's assistant superintendent, Bill Erlendson, would like to see even more information on those school report cards. His district added the amount of revenue per school to its Web site, and people were confused because that number includes many elements, he said.

Erlendson said parents need to understand why one school might have \$20,000 more than another school. District officials point out that inequities can exist when one school has a cluster of older, more experienced teachers with many credentials and another has more younger teachers.

And parents shouldn't necessarily leap to conclusions about age, either, Erlendson said. "An experienced teacher isn't necessarily the best teacher." Very generic statements about salaries, he said, "don't really look deep into other issues."

In Simitian's bill, however, the amended reporting requirements are a first step to "what may be an uncomfortable conversation," he said. "But it's a conversation we have to have if we're going to do right by every kid in the state."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

For more information about the bill, check http://www.around/thecapitol.com/bills/SB_687/

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