

Opinion:

Public needs dropout data on dismal county schools

By Alan Bonsteel

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Two weeks into office, Gov. Jerry Brown eliminated the office of the secretary of education on the basis that it was redundant. The move was hailed as "simplifying California's education bureaucracy."

That's a nice start, but why don't we do something that would really matter, like eliminating the county offices of education?

California's public schools are run by four layers of bureaucracy at the federal, state, county and district levels. These bureaucracies are not even a hierarchy, but more like independent authorities that often disagree on who is responsible for what, usually settling their grudges in court at taxpayer expense.

When students are expelled from district schools for behavioral problems or get in trouble with the police and are sent to juvenile hall, they wind up in the misnamed county "continuation" schools, which might better be known as "abandon all hope" schools, as more than three-fourths of their charges drop out. Some of the more dysfunctional county offices of education, like San Bernardino's, go for years without awarding a high school diploma.

These county offices are almost completely invisible to the public, and are thus even more dominated by the giant public school teachers unions than the school districts are.

This year, if all goes well, as a result of the passage of Senate Bill 651 in 2009, Californians will receive the double shock of learning of the county office of education dropout factories, and learning of the very existence of this level of bureaucracy. They will also learn of a shell game that allows school districts to hide dropouts.

Under the current system, if a district expels a student to the county office, once they have enrolled there the district does not have to accept responsibility for them as a dropout. Instead, they dodge the issue by claiming "the kid's not our dropout, he spent three whole hours in the county system before bolting." And, since the county offices of education dropout numbers have not been reported in the state Department of Education press releases in the past, these dropouts until now have simply disappeared from public view.

And, since this shell game provides a perverse incentive for the school districts to expel at-risk students to the county, the students are victimized by the worst possible thing that could happen to them: being separated from their friends and favorite teachers, and being shipped to faraway county schools with fifth-rate teachers and a student body that changes almost by the hour.

Our children who are victimized by the catastrophe of the county offices of education are the most vulnerable and defenseless. When they arrive at the county offices, they are being given their one last desperate chance. They are at the last bus stop on the road to nowhere.

Unfortunately, getting these new data to the public is at risk, as the current dropout reporting system is dependent on the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System, or CALPADS, which has lost much of its funding through the recent budget cuts. It's not clear that the Department of Education will report county offices of education dropouts at all, despite the legal mandate of SB 651. Also at risk is the equally important reporting on middle school dropouts, who constitute 15 percent of all dropouts in California, data that are also mandated this year by SB 651.

The Department of Education might have a point that the lack of a refined computer system makes reporting at the district and county level tough. But that's not an excuse for failing to report county dropouts and middle school dropouts at the statewide level. The data supporting those basic statistics are readily available, and crunching the numbers requires nothing more sophisticated than the calculator application of a smartphone.

There is no crisis facing the state of California more crucial than our dropout catastrophe. A teenager who drops out today will be a tragedy for our society for the next half-century. The place to start in turning around this disaster is getting accurate data to the public about things like the dropout factories in our county offices of education, so we can start doing something that works instead.