

Opinion:

Scandal of Middle-School Dropouts

By ALAN BONSTEEL

President, California Parents for Educational Choice

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California Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell, won his job eight years ago with the help of millions of dollars from the California Teachers Association, and he has spent the past eight years working, not to help our schoolchildren, but to protect the union bosses who bought him. O'Connell has tried to convince the public that we are spending thousands of dollars less per student than we are, that our dropout rate is far lower than it is, and that test scores are much better than they really are, all in order to avoid accountability and more freedom of choice in our public schools.

It is not surprising, therefore, that one of his final acts as he ends his termed-out tenure, is trying to hide from Californians the catastrophe of middle-school dropouts.

And the next lackey who will hold the job, also bought and paid for by the CTA, is Democratic Assemblyman Tom Torlakson of Antioch. The CTA spent more than \$2 million to elect Torlakson, who takes office next month.

A Department of Education news release this month on graduation rates for the 2008-09 school year stated: "The adjusted four-year derived dropout rate for the same school year is 21.7 percent."

The release also said, "There are significant numbers of students who drop out of school during the middle school years. Although [the department] posts dropout counts for middle school grades, middle school dropout rates have never been calculated."

If O'Connell and Torlakson don't want to talk about middle-school dropouts, we will. In California, about 15 percent of all dropouts leave school before starting high school. This means that in a typical unified school district, with an official 70 percent graduation rate for high school students (The rate is about 59 percent for Hispanic and black children), the true overall dropout rate, including students who leave during sixth, seventh and eighth grades, is 34.5 percent.

Imagine a California kindergarten classroom filled with 30 eager, excited, and enthralled children. The catastrophic reality is that 10 of those 30 deserving kids won't graduate from high school, and at least one of them will never even start high school.

Is there a mother anywhere who has once cradled her newborn baby in her arms, full of love and hope and dreams, who would feel anything but tears and grief if that child never even started high school – or, even worse, ended up in the slammer?

The double tragedy is that we now know a lot about how to keep kids in school, Here in California, our charter schools – public schools of choice – are leaving compulsory public schools in the dust with lower dropout rates and higher test scores. One of the most shining examples is Oakland's American Indian Public Charter Middle School, which, with some of Oakland's most disadvantaged students and per-student funding much lower than that of Oakland's traditional public schools, is now the state's top-scoring middle school on test results, and has a near-zero dropout rate.

And the conscience of the nation has been touched by the game-changing film "Waiting for Superman," which focuses on the much lower dropout rates of charter schools and their much higher rates of college admissions.

We cannot afford the catastrophe of having thousands of our middle school kids dropping out before even starting high school. We need to do whatever it takes to turn today's tragedy into tomorrow's triumph.

Someday soon, all of our children will be enrolled in schools that their families have freely chosen, and that give them the sense of community, of belonging, even of family, that will keep them in school and get them safely to graduation day.