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By Paul Tran

Editor's Note: California's education system has been on a downward slide for too long, with the state that was once a leader in key indicators, now 48th among the 50 states in high school graduates who go to college. But the information is available to empower communities and policymakers to create excellence once again. Paul Tran is communications director at Californians for Justice, which works with Parents and Students for Great Schools (PSGS) a coalition of leading grassroots and advocacy organizations.

In Greek mythology, King Sisyphus is sentenced to an afterlife in which he must push a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll down again just as he reaches the top. It's a story of frustration and futility that is a fitting metaphor for school reform efforts in California.

That Sisyphean scenario is evident in a new report to be released yesterday, which describes the long, uphill effort California faces in moving our public schools toward excellence. The annual Educational Opportunity Report by UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) examines the educational achievement and conditions in California's public schools. Its findings would have been shocking a decade ago. Today, they are almost taken for granted by a public used to bad schools. But the findings are worth noting.

- California ranks 48th among all states in the percentage of its senior class that enrolls in a four-year college.
- California schools have more than 15,000 non-credentialed teachers, and they are disproportionately concentrated in schools that serve low-income and English learners.
- Even before recent budget cuts, California spent \$2,000 less per student than the national average.

As with all great tragedies, there is ample irony:

- California needs 12,000 new nurses by 2014 and 100,000 new teachers in the next decade to replace retiring teachers.
- Forty-four percent of California's 170,000-plus prisoners do not have a high school diploma or GED.
- Each year, the United States issues thousands of H1-B visas and imports thousands of temporary skilled workers (195,000 in 2004; 85,000 in 2008), many to work at California tech companies.

The data adds up to this: California is desperate for skilled labor, yet is under-educating its future workforce. It spends millions on a prison population that can't contribute to the state's income or growth. Then, to add insult to injury, California imports labor to make up for the deficit of educated workers.

At the ground level, we as grassroots community organizers and advocates see the results of the education crisis everyday. An immigrant student in Fresno attends an overcrowded school, where some of his classes are held in a gymnasium and his math teacher is trained to teach history. He is so disengaged that he drops out by his sophomore year. He's among the 33 percent of Fresno students who drop out.

Here's another Greek myth, one that offers a more hopeful paradigm. Prometheus steals fire from the gods and gives it to the mortals, a gift that instantly furthers mankind. In this case, let's think of information as the fire and the IDEA report is full of information to light the way to educational reform.

Cutting-edge data about how many freshmen graduate high school eligible for college, and which schools receive what funding, is the fire. Identifying the distribution of experienced and inexperienced teachers is the fire.

Information allows us to focus on targeted needs. Does Oakland need more counselors? Does Long Beach need more A-G courses? The data informs discussions about funding and distribution among school board members and state officials. It even gives us the tools to propose our own legislation, if needed.

The next step is taking the information and instituting real changes, such as establishing a per-pupil funding structure that would provide the resources and opportunities necessary for all students to be college eligible. Or ensuring that experienced and effective teachers are equitably distributed throughout our schools. It will take careful negotiation and political will.

But it can be done.

At the end of the day, the educational crisis is as much about a failure of imagination as it is about a lack of resources. It's about a failure to imagine and re-imagine our schools systems and our communities. And it's about a failure to see the potential of our low-income, immigrant students of color.

The crisis is here. The time to act is now. Where is the will?

For a copy of the UCLA IDEA report, go to: www.edopp.org.