



Parent activist says lasting changes must come from ‘the bottom up’

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By Kido

A funny thing happened on the way to education reform: No one really talked to the parents.

That’s why this May 11, as the anniversary of *Brown v. Board* approaches, I’m going to Sacramento to speak to my elected officials, the people who are supposed to represent me and my children.

I’m going as part of the Parent Leadership Action Network (PLAN) and the Campaign for Quality Education (CQE). And in a role reversal, we’re going to give California grades on its public school system over the last decade. The theme for our visit is “M.I.A.: California Ditching Schools from 2000 – 2010” and as expected the grades in Funding, Graduation Rates, and College and Career Readiness are failing.

As a parent of two students who went to school in Oakland and Berkeley, I’ve seen firsthand the decline of public schools. In fact, from the implementation of the California High School Exit Exam in 2002 to the \$17 billion in education cuts from 2008 – 2010 and a dozen other policies that have disproportionately and adversely affected students of color, you could call the last decade an attack on education.

From 2000 – 2010, as our schools became more diverse, California ditched schools.

At the ground level, I saw my children steered away from the A-G courses that would have allowed them to be eligible for college. I saw counselors turn over often. I saw a lack of janitors and filthy restrooms. The statistics are staggering. California graduates less than 57% of its black and brown students. This is not a problem, this is a crisis: We are creating a lost generation of black and brown young people. I shudder to think what will happen to them and the communities they live in—incarceration, low-paying jobs, no health care.

So what can be done?

Well, over the last ten years, as parents and students have organized across California, we have proven that we can change public education and create new and lasting opportunities for our low-income students, immigrant students, and students of color.

In 2001, we helped to pass AB 540 which allowed our undocumented immigrant students to pay in-state tuition at public colleges. In 2004, we settled the *Williams vs. California* lawsuit and won guarantees for qualified teachers, safe and clean facilities, and \$800 million for emergency repairs. The next year, we pushed Los Angeles Unified, the second largest school district in the nation, to adopt an A-G curriculum for all students so that all graduates would be eligible for a UC or CSU school. And in 2008, we prevented the Governor from cutting an additional \$1 billion from the education budget.

But just as important as it is for parents to organize to improve our schools, we also need to be listened to and included in the process of change. We need our state leaders to hear our voices and take a stand for policies that support public education and prepare all students for college and a career, not for policies that ditch schools and leave our children behind.

Along with teachers and administrators, we are right there in struggle to educate our young people. We see the problems, the challenges; we know our children best, often better than they know themselves.

Perhaps “parent” is too quaint a term in these education discussions. Maybe we should call ourselves “Educational Consultants.” I wonder if that would get us listened to more often.

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