

Sunday, November 28, 1993

Spurred by Prop. 174, education reform is a hot California topic; now discerning would-be reformers must winnow wheat from chaff

SCHOOL REFORM is coming to California. The question is whether it will be driven by what children need to learn or by politics.

The defeat of Proposition 174 earlier this month had the salutary effect of pushing education reform to the top of the state's agenda. Schools are right up there with the economy, crime, AIDS and immigration reform.

Even before Prop. 174's last gasp, politicians were heading for the podium.

Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, D-San Francisco, announced that he would host an education summit next year. Treasurer and gubernatorial candidate Kathleen Brown announced a reform plan. So did Gov. Wilson.

Two groups of voucher advocates said they would try to put new initiatives on the ballot as early as next year. Even the California Teachers Association, presumably chastened by the Prop. 174 fight, pledged to back reform.

Not bad for a proposition that got clobbered by a 2 to 1 margin.

Polls show that Californians are sick and tired of business as usual in their schools. Only 1 percent believe schools are moving fast enough on reform. That's a pretty clear mandate for change.

It's like turning around a juggernaut. California has more than 5 million students in kindergarten through 12th grade and spends \$25 billion a year on schools. The state education code has 6,300 pages and weighs about 40 pounds.

In three decades, state schools have gone from universally admired to widely disparaged. Once a national model, our schools now sometimes grovel with Mississippi at the bottom of the statistical barrel.

POLITICIANS' pleas and promises are not new: Safe schools, more accountability and less bureaucracy, high standards, more computers in the classrooms. The subject of learning is often left out, but perhaps that's implicit.

Gov. Wilson has taken two promising steps.

First, he named Frank Newman, president of the non-partisan, Colorado-based Education Commission of the States, to act as a liaison and catalyst for reform. In pledging no protection for "sacred cows," Wilson said: "Tenure, curriculum, specific programs, governance, compensation, credentialing — all are to be legitimate sub-

jects for inquiry, evaluation and, when appropriate, recommended revision."

Wilson wants a broad-based school reform plan by next summer.

Second, the governor nominated as interim state school superintendent Sanford Sigoloff. He's a Los Angeles businessman Wilson calls "the wizard of corporate turnaround." A replacement for ousted schools chief Bill Honig, Sigoloff will serve only one year. As a non-educator, his appointment caused lots of grousing among the educational establishment. Good. The schools need a message of change. Sigoloff is the messenger.

Other reforms are already in motion.

CHARTER SCHOOLS, freed from much bureaucratic control, are starting up as the result of legislation, which went into effect in January, allowing 100 such schools around the state.

Other new legislation also makes it easier for students to transfer to public schools outside their home districts. In San Francisco, Superintendent Bill Rojas has instituted an intra-district school-choice plan that makes school survival competitive. Schools that fail will be shut down.

Assembly member Delaine Eastin, D-Fremont, who wants to be state school superintendent, is studying how to reform the stultifying education code.

Wilson's reform plan is sketchy, but he wants to have schools that are drug- and gun-free, with decent academic testing programs, burdened less by bureaucracy, staffed with teachers who can earn merit pay and with lots of computers hooked up to the information superhighway.

KATHLEEN Brown proposes a \$300 million bond issue. One-third would go for computers and software; one-third to establish special schools for students caught with guns, and one-third to purchase metal detectors, cameras and other security equipment.

All the plans have good points. The trick is to weave the elements into a coherent whole. Change is a powerful concept, but if it fails to achieve clarity, decisive action and provable results, it's just another buzzword. Education shouldn't be left out of the equation. It should come first.

We believe that California's elected representatives are serious about school reform. They know their results will be graded with great attention and little leniency.

SCHOOL REFORM
FOR THE
21ST CENTURY