

Squeezing California Schools

Karling Aguilera-Fort believes that California's Year of Education should be renamed the Year of Increasing Disservice to Language Learners and Other Students

California is facing some of the most dramatic budget cuts in decades. These cuts are affecting all social services across the board. Education is one of the most impacted areas, even though the Governor declared 2008 to be the Year of Education. It is ironic that in the Year of Education the state's Chief Executive Officer is proposing to deprive our students of the already slim services they receive.

As we all know, these service reductions or eliminations will harm students from socio-economically disadvantaged areas the most. These cuts will have a tremendous impact on our English Learners, our Latino students, our African American students, and our students with Special Educational needs. I then ask the following questions: Does the Governor think that by taking \$12 billion away from our public educational system we are going to close the achievement gap? Does the Governor think that by declaring a state of emergency our students will remember 2008 as the Year of Education?

California already ranks 46th in per pupil spending before these budget cuts. From being one of the vanguard states in the educational field, we are becoming one of the less funded, less innovative and definitely more reductionist states in the delivery of instructional curriculum. While other states are looking at ways to increase their educational funding and ensure that students from underserved populations or sub groups receive the type of support they need in order to be successful, California is ensuring that we maintain or increase our dropout rate. We all know

which students are most likely to dropout in California: African American and Latino students. Apparently, the Governor has forgotten his commitment to the people of California.

When the voters elected Schwarzenegger as the Chief Executive Officer of the state, they believed that he would take the state to a higher level of performance in education, and definitely to higher levels of social services for all. Today, it is evident that education and social services are not priorities for our CEO. It seems like the story is repeating itself — our poorer students are being robbed of their educational right once again. Dr. Carter Woodson, the "Father of Black History," argued against prosperity at the expense of people, and his message is alive and well. He expressed his concerns about the education of our African American youngsters, clearly stating that under a diminishing system, students will not become critical thinkers. In 1933, with *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, he invited people to be outspoken and to take a stand against this unequal treatment: "Negroes trained under such conditions without protest become downright cowards, and in life will continue as slaves in spite of their nominal emancipation."

It is not right for us to stay quiet and allow injustice to spread throughout our institutions. The only way of stopping these abuses from harming the education of our children is by granting our educational system the appropriate financial resources. We want to see our students succeed; we want to see our stu-

dents become agents of change; and we want to see our students be real leaders both today and in tomorrow's world. I wonder what the rationale can be for our CEO, an English learner himself, to promote such horrendous school budget cuts. Is he planning to eliminate services that contribute to the development of an integral citizen?

"Real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better..." The words of Dr. Carter Woodson encourage me to ask the following questions: "What are we educating our children for? Are we going to cooperate to keep the status quo of the educational system? Or are we going to take actions to ensure adequate funding for our public schools?"

If we want to create a nation where all citizens are participants in its democracy, we must provide the education necessary for such democracy. We are morally mandated to invite our students to be part of the desired future. The only way to arrive at that productive future is by acknowledging their right to learn in a well-funded school system. By depriving our schools of appropriate financial resources, we are asking for the same results we have had in California for the last ten years: our African American and our English learners keep falling behind. The achievement gap between these groups and their white peers is still evident. Do we think that it will get better when we take more resources out of the hands of our students? The founders of

this nation had the dream of one America for all. They fought in order to give all our children the gift of a free nation. It is time to make that dream a reality.

Abraham Lincoln said, “The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.” (Gettysburg Address, 1863) If we are to focus on the development of our most precious resource — our children — we must have an educational system that values people, works for people and nurtures people. Let’s work together for the children and youth who are attending schools. Let’s work together for all learners. Let’s honor our heroes by truly developing a nation for all people. X

Karling Aguilera-Fort is the current President of the California Association for Bilingual Education.

