

Help for struggling students

By Avery Bissett

May 16, 2014

Last year, both Long Beach Unified School District and California's graduation rates exceeded 80 percent, a laudable accompaniment. However, there is clearly still room for improvement. The remaining 20 percent – those who need assistance most – deserve proactive solutions.

There has been abundant discussion of how to fix our ailing public education system, but many of the proposed solutions are dead-ends. A recent Cato Institute study concluded that even a near-tripling in per-student spending over the past 40 years has not translated into academic gains. And while school vouchers may have potential, such initiatives remain mired in stalemate between teachers unions and would-be reformers.

Sadly, some important factors that help students succeed academically have been overlooked. Key among these is access to academic resources such as tutoring and after-school academies.

There exists a strong correlation between the locations of high-performing schools and access to vibrant after-school academies and tutors. And a recent University of Chicago Urban Lab study confirmed that “students who received tutoring and mentoring failed two fewer courses per year on average,” and “their likelihood of being ‘on track’ for graduation rose by nearly one-half.”

The benefits are two-fold. Every student will inevitably encounter an ineffective teacher or daunting subject. Supplemental academic resources can help bridge the gap. And students who would normally skip more challenging courses would gain the requisite support to persevere and succeed.

Currently, states can subsidize approved tutoring providers for low-income students at low-performing schools. This has been a boondoggle. Less than 15 percent of qualified students participate. States are often unable to properly vet tutors and districts are near powerless to disqualify approved companies.

This system makes it all too easy for crony capitalism to fester. Many approved providers are teachers from the same school system. And unlike private tutors and after-school academies, heavily subsidized tutoring companies have little incentive to create a good product. The Department of Education found “no evidence of impacts of offering” tutoring to students through

the Supplemental Educational Services program. Yet Florida taxpayers pay as much as \$1,500 per student for ineffective tutoring.

Public schools already have enough on their plate, and would be better off not subsidizing tutoring. Rather, the free market is the solution. Removing the current “safety net” of “approved providers” will let natural competition weed out ineffective tutors and offer parents the best product possible.

Governments should direct resources to enable and encourage families to use existing academic resources. Parents should be allowed to deduct some of the costs of these often pricey services.

Creating a special voucher program or tax credit for low-income families would mitigate costs.

These initiatives would also be less politically contentious. Private after-school academies and private tutors would spur public schools to improve while not competing directly with teachers unions. It would also serve as a valuable case study of whether government should help alleviate the financial burden of alternative education. The positions of both sides of the school voucher debate would be put to the test. Think of it as a smaller scale trial run.

The discussion around education has become stale and a disservice to our children. Instead of asking why particular schools are failing, we should be asking why other schools are succeeding and then seek to emulate these schools. Avery Bissett is a commentator and peace studies major at Chapman University.