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OPINION

## After schools chief race drama, time to get back to work on education

By William S. Koski Updated 3:54 pm, Friday, November 7, 2014



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Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson greets supporters during an election night party after his battle with Marshall Tuck. Calif., on Tuesday, Nov. 4, 2014. The non-partisan race for California State Superintendent pits two Democrats, Torlakson against former charter school executive Marshall Tuck. (AP Photo/The Sacramento Bee, Andrew Seng) MAGAZINES OUT; LOCAL TELEVISION OUT (KCRA3, KXTV10, KOVR13, KUVS19, KMAZ31, KTXL40); MANDATORY CREDIT<252><137>

According to the partisans and pundits, the starkest divide within the ranks of Democrats is over the future of education policy. On one side are the “reformers” (detractors call them “corporatists”) who favor market-based reforms and school choice such as charter schools, disruptive technology like online learning, student performance-based accountability for schools and teachers, and the abolition of teacher-employment protections.

On the other side are those who support public schools as they exist, are politically aligned with teachers’ unions, and believe that the struggle is for greater educational resources and maybe even for the very existence of public schools.

For those partisans and pundits, the race for California superintendent of public instruction provided a ready stage and characters from central casting: Marshall Tuck the Young Reformer versus Tom Torlakson the Old Guard Unionist.

Production costs for this drama outstripped all other California political contests at \$31 million, with the unions directly contributing more than \$12 million to Torlakson’s coffers and a who’s who of tech and corporate tycoons, including the names Fisher, Broad, Jobs and Walton, backing Tuck.

There was even a ready-made wedge issue to set the scene for what otherwise would be another humdrum race for state superintendent — the candidates’ positions on the Vergara vs. California lawsuit that seeks to abolish teacher tenure.

But that’s the Hollywood story line. Reality is more mundane.

Prior to the election, both candidates actually agreed on key education policy directions for the state, including the governor’s Local Control Funding Formula and the switch to Common Core curriculum. Although the race was styled as a referendum on the Unionist’s record and the Reformer’s agenda, the record-low voter turnout and the modest 4 percent margin of victory for Torlakson, hardly give him a mandate.

More practically, other than the bully pulpit, the superintendent’s office has little formal power over state education policy. The real work of reform will need to be of the incremental, sleeves-rolled-up kind, rather than the disruptive, blowing-up-boxes kind.

Reform of our schools, ranging from improvement of teacher quality to closing the achievement gap to increasing knowledge of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, will require collaboration and compromise. Torlakson will need to immediately start the healing from this pundit- and partisan-induced wound.

Take the Vergara case. There, a Silicon Valley-backed group of plaintiffs sued the state, the governor and the superintendent, alleging that the conspiracy among teacher tenure rules, dismissal protections and seniority preferences during layoffs denied children — particularly poor children — their fundamental right to an education.

A Los Angeles Superior Court judge agreed and struck down those employment protection statutes, sending shock waves throughout the state and the nation. But the governor, teachers unions and Superintendent Torlakson appealed that decision, providing the candidates, pundits and partisans with the wedge issue they needed. Unlike Torlakson, Tuck vowed to drop the appeal and work toward reform of teacher employment rules.

One striking aspect of Vergara, however, is that all sides agree that California needs to attract and retain high-quality teachers, particularly in those classrooms with English learners and economically disadvantaged children. Indeed, we are facing a teacher supply crisis.

The latest figures from the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing show that enrollment in teacher preparation programs plunged from 42,245 in 2008-09 to 19,933 in 2012-13 — a decline of 52 percent, and a jaw-dropping decrease of 74 percent since 2001-02. With the ongoing exodus of Boomer teachers, California needs to attract and retain high-quality Millennials, and that isn’t happening.

But the partisans disagree on how to improve teacher quality: Reform employment rules or improve pay and working conditions? Well, both might be needed.

Reform of certain rigid rules may be a necessary (though hardly a sufficient) condition for improving teacher quality. Take “last-in, first-out” layoff rules. These rules may have the perverse effect of pink-slipping talented teachers and creating untenable turnover in our poorest schools.

In the event of economic downturn, school leaders should be given more flexibility to distribute the layoff pain and ensure that promising, junior teachers are kept in the classroom.

Or, take tenure. If school districts and the state are willing to provide coaching for struggling new teachers during their probationary period, then an extension of the time to tenure from two to, say, three or four years would benefit both junior teachers and the administrators who must make decisions about their fate. There is room for compromise, even on these tricky issues.

But reform of employment protections is no panacea. Simply providing more administrative discretion over personnel decisions will not be enough to improve student learning.

The rules are not solely responsible for the teacher quality gap and under-performing teachers. The idea that we can fire our way out of this problem assumes that there exists a robust bulpen of high-quality, would-be teachers who want to enter under-performing classrooms. Not true.

We need to strengthen the teaching profession by making it more difficult to become a teacher (thereby making the profession more competitive and higher performing), and then provide the resources to fairly pay and improve the working conditions for teachers, particularly those in the toughest assignments.

But these reforms will require persistent work and a strong advocate for education in Sacramento. Someone who will reshape our state’s priorities and who knows that modest reform is necessary, but real improvement requires resources.

So roll up your sleeves, Mr. Torlakson. It’s time to extend a hand across the aisle and get back to work.

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