

Q&A: California Assemblywoman Betty Karnette

Contributed by PT Editors
Wednesday, 14 November 2007

After more than 30 years as a classroom math and science teacher, California Assemblywoman Betty Karnette is in a good position to discuss the failures and promise of our educational system. But as a California state legislator, are she or her colleagues in a position to change the system for the better?

PT: The United States' public education system has long been considered the "great equalizer" in our society, providing opportunities to even the least fortunate citizens who have the ambition to learn. How do you think the political principle of equality is manifest in our educational policies today?

Karnette: I think policymakers in California and across the country want the education system to reflect these essential social ideals. I think we're on the right track with the way we address equality, but I don't think we've done it just yet. We've got to fine-tune our standards and accountability measurement, but we also have to look at the complexity of our communities.

Policymakers and teachers alike need to realize that people have different needs. For the system to be effective, it has to recognize that without giving up accountability and standards.

PT: What are some ways to ensure equality in our education system while recognizing these differences?

Karnette: First, we should look at improving the quality and number of counselors to work with our kids. If you don't have someone capable of figuring out what our students' different needs are, you can't address them. It takes people—human interaction—to do it. There are a lot of needs that can't be measured by standardized tests.

PT: Do you think our educational policies are ever distorted by an unrealistic view of "equality," in the sense that one type of education is viewed as "unequal" or inferior to another? There seems to be a heavy onus placed on college preparatory education versus technical or vocational programs.

Karnette: It's interesting to look at the question that way. "Equality," in my opinion, is really about equal access opportunity. Not all students even need a university degree. One of my colleagues in the legislature was recently talking about his kids; one is a teacher and the other is in construction. Now, the one in construction is doing very well—financially, he's doing even better than the teacher. Are they unequal? Not at all. So for non-college-bound students, "equality" really means access to work that you can do, or a job that you really want. That's why vocational education is very important and shouldn't be viewed as unequal.

I think our legislators are looking at it from the right point of view. To ensure social equality, it will really require improving career technical education. I don't think anyone looks at it as unworthy. The California Board of Education adopted a bipartisan piece of legislation from 2002 that requires frameworks for career technical education, just like we have in other disciplines. They've specified the goals around 15 industry sectors, funding has been boosted and I think we'll continue to provide more funding as the programs continue.

PT: Few would argue against the goals of No Child Left Behind, but an equal number of people are extremely unhappy with the program's implementation. Is there a better way to ensure equality of education across all of our schools in teaching children the basics they need to succeed?

Karnette: I definitely can't argue with that—we need to set some standards. The problem is that NCLB really gets into micromanaging and that's the problem. Schools aren't always the same, and schools across the nation need different things. We had baseline standards in California long before NCLB was even considered. We forced schools to make annual, recorded progress. I think that's good because you need to know if people are making progress—you need to know that the students are learning the basics. But if the federal government is really concerned about helping students, it's going to have to provide funding and resources that kids need to compete in the global marketplace.

We have a lot of unmet needs in our educational system, and we need the funding to provide those things. Yes, education costs more than it used to, but so do houses, cars and other things. We all know that the single most important factor in providing kids with a quality education is the teacher, and how do you get the best teachers?

PT: Pay them.

Karnette: That's right, and that takes money. Yes, we need to spend money on keeping our schools up to date technologically, but where students' learning really begins is with language and vocabulary. You can ask any teacher and

they'll tell you the same thing.

PT: From your perspective as a former teacher of 30 years, what do you think has changed most significantly—for better or for worse—in the way we educate our kids?

Karnette: Well, I don't think we're as flexible as we once were, and that has taken some of the creativity away from teachers. As I said before, you have to have strong language and vocabulary skills, but you've got to be adaptable. In California, we're so diverse that we have to be able to adapt in order to provide kids with equal opportunities for a strong education. We need art, music, physical education and other programs, but by becoming more structured, we've taken away a lot of that flexibility that we need.

PT: So, to maintain the level of flexibility we need to equally address the different needs of students and schools in California. Would you then say that the federal government's best role would be primarily as a resource provider?

Karnette: Yes, I think it has to be that way. States have very different populations from one another, and very different concerns. California, for example, faces completely different challenges than Alabama. The needs are just different, and NCLB doesn't address that.

PT: Assemblywoman Karnette, thank you for your time.

Betty Karnette represents California's 54th Assembly District. She serves on the Assembly Committees on Appropriations; Insurance; Rules; Transportation; Ports; and the Arts, Entertainment, Sports, Tourism and Internet Media committee.