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It's past time for our students to gain equality

By George Loomis

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The struggle for educational justice continues: As new laws are passed to formalize the Williams v. California settlement, the real work has just begun to promote lasting improvements in our schools.

On the last meeting day of this year's legislative session, California lawmakers took a historic step for the future of low-income students throughout the state: They passed a bundle of bills needed to make the settlement in Williams vs. California a reality.

After the state's expenditure of \$18 million to fight the lawsuit, Gov. Schwarzenegger has accepted responsibility for the abysmal lack of basic resources and the poor conditions of our public schools and agreed to adopt higher standards, tighten accountability and allocate needed funds.

To more than a million students in California who attend the state's most disadvantaged schools, a great deal of work lies ahead to achieve real educational justice in California.

There is no doubt that the Williams settlement is a significant milestone. The case was filed four years ago on behalf of Eliezer Williams, student plaintiffs in Fresno and low-income students of color throughout California. Hundreds of students, parents and teachers have joined Eli Williams in making the state accountable and bringing to light the terrible and unjust conditions existing in schools serving low-income communities of color.

Fresno witnesses

Dozens of Fresno Unified School District students were witnesses in the case, spoke out at rallies in Sacramento and met with education officials in our local districts to share concerns about the lack of basic resources and opportunities in our schools. Over the past few months, we urged Gov. Schwarzenegger to settle the Williams case and met with legislators to encourage them to support the settlement.

As an education advocate, I've heard first hand from students and teachers who have experienced many of the problems that the Williams case addressed. I've heard about the difficulties of having lots of substitutes instead of a regular teacher, or worse, having a regular teacher who didn't have knowledge in the subject he was teaching in.

I've also heard from students at several high schools who have experienced not having enough textbooks in classes, which means they couldn't take a book home to study. School overcrowding is another problem in Fresno Unified. Often times students have to scramble to get desks because there's just not enough space for everyone.

The students who attend the "low-performing schools" will have to maintain a strong commitment to make sure that the settlement's promise of equality becomes a reality. To more than a million students, parents and the communities who support us, we see this as an important opportunity to continue our struggle for educational justice.

The settlement promises to give us new information and tools to oversee whether our schools are really providing students with the basic opportunities to learn: qualified teachers, textbooks to take home and schools that are not crumbling and overcrowded.

Getting action

Another promise is the opportunity to file complaints and make sure that the agreements on paper translate into real improvements in our schools. We need to use these systems to continue to identify the resource injustices and fight to give low-income students a real chance for their futures. We must make sure that parents and students know how the complaint system works and their rights to use it. We must continue to watch and mobilize in order to make sure that the monitoring system works and allows communities to bring real problems to light. The state must respond to the complaint process; it cannot become just a hotline that doesn't get answered.

As the years go by, we need to change the educational system so people don't need to keep complaining. We need to make sure that we don't slide back into these same inequalities. Policy makers can prevent this by supporting SB 1419, which creates an opportunity for a teaching and learning index that would make the Williams legislation more meaningful. The index would measure the basic resources and conditions students are getting, school by school, across the state. The index would also allow the public to know whether or not the settlement is making real improvements.

For Williams legislation, check out the state's website at www.leginfo.ca.gov and enter the bill numbers AB 1550: School Overcrowding; AB 3001: Quality Teachers; SB 6: Facilities Repairs SB 550: Resources, Monitoring System and State Oversight.