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SUNDAY FORUM

Williams vs. California settlement is just the beginning

By Danna Guzman

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 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 v. California a reality.

To more than a million students like me 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 Ehezzer Williams, student plaintiffs in Long Beach, 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.

Members of Californians for Justice in Long Beach were witnesses in the case, spoke out at rallies in Sacramento, and met with education officials in our local districts to share our 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.

I attend Cabrillo High School in Long Beach, where up to 84 percent of our teachers are uncredentialed, which impacts the quality of our instruction and determines what we learn, especially if teachers aren't trained in the subject areas they are teaching.

Many of my teachers have had to buy classroom materials themselves. At times, they have been unable to make photocopies for all the students. During test prep there were not enough copies of prep materials and we had to share.

We also face overcrowding. I've seen how there aren't enough desks for all students in the class. I fear that the lack of resources and overcrowding will continue to hurt students' chances of receiving a good education.

Those of us who attend low-performing schools will maintain a strong commitment to make sure that the settlement's promise of equality becomes a reality. To over 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.

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 our futures. We must make sure that parents know their rights to use the monitoring system and that students know they have a right to complain. The complaint process needs to be responded to. 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 teaching and learning (OTL) index that would make the Williams legislation more meaningful. The index would measure the basic resources and conditions we as 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.

Danna Guzman is a student at Cabrillo High School in Long Beach.