

How can community members take action to make sure the *Williams* settlement makes real changes for California schools?

Californians from all communities must make sure that the *Williams* settlement turns into real improvements for students who have been going to the schools with the most problems. Even if school districts do what they are supposed to, it will take serious action to improve learning conditions for students in the schools. Communities must become involved and make their voices heard. Here are some ways that students, parents and community members can take action to make sure that the *Williams* settlement turns into real improvements for students:

- Learn about what the settlement says that state, county, and district officials must do, and make sure that they follow through with their responsibilities.
- Help to make sure that community members receive information about the complaint process so they can use it effectively.
- Join with other parents, community members, students, teachers, and administrators to make sure that the schools in your area are taking the necessary steps to fix problems and prevent them in the future.

Can communities take steps beyond the *Williams* settlement to improve California's schools?

The *Williams* settlement is an important first step in improving California's public schools and promoting equal educational opportunities. But in order for it to make a real and lasting difference, Californians will need to keep the pressure on officials and lawmakers to make changes beyond the specific points in the settlement. These are just some of the many opportunities for communities to continue to take action and support the struggle for educational justice in California:

- Put pressure on the legislature to provide communities with more information about the opportunities available to students in each public school.
- Ask your state legislators to work on changing the education funding system to make sure that schools receive enough money, and that funds are given out fairly. Schools with more problems should be the top priority.
- Work with students, parents and community members to develop new school funding models based on how much money is really needed to provide a quality education.

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Williams Versus *California*

The *Williams* Settlement: What does it mean for California communities?

An Overview

In August 2004, the state of California agreed to settle *Williams v. California*, a landmark civil rights case brought by Eliezer Williams, which challenged the state to ensure quality learning conditions for millions of low-income students of color. The *Williams* settlement is an important victory for students, parents and their communities. It creates new standards for measuring whether schools have the basic conditions students need to learn such as textbooks, well-trained teachers and clean and safe school facilities. The settlement also provides many opportunities for communities to become involved and play a major role in holding school officials accountable for showing how well schools are meeting these standards. While the settlement is a major step in the struggle for improving California's schools for all students, it will take the continued action of Californians from all communities to make sure that the settlement's promise of educational equality is real and lasting.

This overview of the *Williams* settlement highlights the reasons why students filed the case, what the settlement says, and how communities and grass roots organizations can take action to promote educational justice in their schools.

What is the *Williams* case?

In May 2000, on the anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, Eliezer Williams and courageous students across California filed the case of *Williams v. California* in response to the terrible conditions in their public schools. This case argued that the state of California does not give millions of students — mainly low-income students, immigrant students, and students of color — the basic tools of a decent education. The *Williams* case pointed out that there are many teachers without enough training in the schools, and that many classrooms do not have enough textbooks. It also pointed out that many school buildings and facilities are overcrowded, in bad condition, and are dangerous and unhealthy for students.

What were the main arguments in the *Williams* case?

The *Williams* case was based on two basic ideas:

1. The state of California has to provide all students the basic resources they need to learn: qualified teachers, enough materials and decent facilities.
2. All students have a fundamental right to an equal education.

The case argued that California's public education system fails on both of these counts: it does not give all students the necessary educational resources and it allows unequal opportunities across schools. *Williams* charged that the state of California needs to be responsible for making sure that classrooms have the qualified teachers and textbooks that students need. It called on the state to create standards for basic educational materials and an accountability system so schools live up to these standards. It argued that with these new standards, and more funds, the state could prevent bad conditions in the schools, and fix the problems that already exist.

Have community members supported the *Williams* case?

Since the beginning, many people have struggled to support the *Williams* case. Students throughout California have been fighting for better and more equal school conditions. Some youth became active as plaintiffs and witnesses in the case and highlighted the terrible conditions that they experienced in California's schools. Others participated in groups that documented educational inequalities and reported them in public forums across the state. Many groups of parents, community members, and grass roots activists statewide have also mobilized to put pressure on the state to improve the public education system. It is partly because of all this hard work that the state finally decided not to challenge the *Williams* case in court.

What are the main points in the *Williams* settlement?

In August 2004, the state of California agreed not to fight the *Williams* case in court and enter into a settlement. In the settlement, the state agreed with every important argument raised by the students who brought the case. The state formally acknowledged its responsibility for ensuring quality and equal education to all California's students. The key points in the settlement involve ensuring that all California public schools provide students with the basic resources they need to learn, including:

- Every student, including English Learners, must have enough textbooks and materials to use in class and to take home.
- Every school and classroom must be clean, safe, and in good condition.
- Every student must have a well-trained teacher according to standards set by California and federal laws.

There are also some other very important points in the settlement about how communities can become actively involved to make sure that the problems in the schools get fixed:

- The settlement creates new standards for measuring whether schools have the basic resources for learning.
- The new standards for school conditions have to be posted in every classroom.
- Each year, officials from each county in California will visit the schools with the greatest need (measured by those with the lowest test scores) to make sure that:
 - ✓ There are enough textbooks and learning materials;
 - ✓ Buildings are safe and in good condition; and
 - ✓ Teachers have the appropriate training to teach the students in their classes.
- County officials have to report what they find in their investigations to the public.
- Parents and community members can raise concerns about school conditions through a new complaint process, and education officials have to investigate these complaints.
- If school districts do not provide adequate textbooks, the state can force them to give students the materials they need.
- The settlement also gives school districts almost \$1 billion to fix the terrible conditions that exist now.
- The "Concept 6" multi-track school calendar must be phased out over the next few years.
- If these new measures do not solve these problems in five years, Eli Williams and other students can return to court.

Does the *Williams* settlement solve all of the problems in California schools?

The *Williams* settlement is a good agreement, and an important step for communities, but there is still a lot of work to do. It is hard for schools with the worst conditions to hire well-trained teachers and keep them. The settlement does not do anything to change this problem. In addition, the settlement does not ensure that California has enough money to provide high quality schooling throughout the state. Even after the settlement, California spends less money on education than almost any other state.

Community members' voices will continue to be essential to put pressure on school officials to make more changes to improve California's schools.