COMMENTARY

The Double Disappointment of QEIA

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PUBLISHED: December 7, 2010

The California Teachers Association has released preliminary findings from their ongoing evaluation of theQuality Education Investment Act (QEIA), The initial findings are generally positive, but theirrelease is an occasion for disappointment rather than celebration, for two reasons.

The first is that the implementation of QEIA coincided with the unprecedented fiscal calamity that has engulfed California's schools. QEIA funding was preserved in the last two budget cycles, while core funding for all schools declined sharply. In consequence, a program that was intended to provide a significant financial boost to low-performing schools has instead served mainly to protect those schools from the worst consequences of the state's budget woes. Schools receiving QEIA funds have used their resources to reduce class size and invest in professional development and collaborative learning for teachers, as the law requires, but the scale and significance of their efforts fall short of what all California schools should—and perhaps would—have been doing had the state's support for the schools been maintained.

The second reason for regret is that the evaluation that the California Teachers Association (CTA) is conducting will never tell us much about whether the QEIA funds are making a difference in the schools that receive them. QEIA was designed as a quasi-experiment, in which a relatively small number of eligible schools would receive a large infusion of new resources tied to specific reform strategies, while other eligible schools received no additional funds. To take advantage of this design, though, the assignment of schools to groups receiving or not receiving funds must be random, and the assignment of schools under QEIA was far from random. We cannot be sure whether the schools that received QEIA funds were systematically different from those that did not, and we cannot know whether subsequent differences in their performance were produced by QEIA or by something else.

The CTA evaluation will continue, with a focus on case study work focused on changes in culture and practice in a sample of QEIA schools, but QEIA will mainly be remembered as a lost opportunity.

Suggested citation

Plank, D. N.. (2010, December). *The double disappointment of QEIA* [Chronicle]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/double-disappointment-qeia

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