



Enhancing Student Opportunities through the Williams Legislation

on the Web *What Is Williams?*

The start of the 2007-08 school year marks the beginning of the third full year of implementing the landmark *Williams* legislation. Passed in 2004, the legislation was enacted to settle *Williams v. California*, a class-action lawsuit filed in May 2000 that claimed the state's poorest children were denied equal access to instructional materials, safe and decent school facilities, and qualified teachers. The legislation reaffirms that all public school students must have the basics of a quality education: clean, safe and adequate school sites, adequate textbooks, and properly credentialed and assigned teachers in every class.

Additionally, the law requires that each county superintendent annually inspect and monitor all low-performing schools—those scoring in the bottom one-third of the state's Academic Performance Index (API). Statewide, 2122 schools are considered low-performing and subject to county superintendent oversight. The number of schools in each county differs widely, ranging from 604 school sites in Los Angeles County to four school sites in Colusa County. Moreover, nearly 40 percent of the students who are the intended beneficiaries of *Williams* attend public schools in Los Angeles County.

Williams legislation sets a base — not a ceiling — for what our schools need to be doing on behalf of our children.

According to Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools Darline P. Robles, the legislation has brought “much-needed financial resources to needy schools for facility repairs and textbooks.” Dr. Robles also believes that *Williams*' success is due to new and expanded accountability systems, including a mechanism for streamlining school district-wide textbook distribution.

The Williams Program has made a positive difference to students

With the conclusion of its third year of implementation, the big question for all educational stakeholders is, “*Has the Williams Legislation made a difference?*” The overall response by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), one of the plaintiffs, and other parties is, “*Yes, the Williams legislation is making difference.*” However, all parties agree that we are “not 100% there, just yet.” The ACLU released a report this past August to provide data in support of that response. A copy of the report, *Williams v. California: The Statewide Impact of Two Years of Implementation* is included on our California State PTA website:



(<http://www.capta.org/sections/tools/whatsnew.cfm?WhatsNewID=305>).

Progress has been made in all areas, especially in school facilities and instructional materials. Although the percentage of fully credentialed teachers in decile 1-3 schools throughout the state increased from 90% in 2004-2005 to 92% in 2005-2006, it is agreed that teacher mis-assignments—perhaps the most critical of the three areas—is the most challenging to correct. As stated in the ACLU 2007 report, “Despite improved teacher assignment practices, and greater numbers of teachers receiving additional training, much more needs to be done to ensure all students have highly qualified and properly assigned teachers in every class.”

For parents and other school stakeholders, perhaps the boldest change that *Williams* brought forth is the Uniform Complaint Process (UCP). The UCP is a powerful tool to help ensure that schools and districts remedy complaints about textbook shortages, unsafe or unhealthful facility conditions, and teacher vacancies and mis-assignments. *All* public schools in the state are required to post notices in every school classroom and public meeting place; the notices must provide information on how to file a complaint. Complaints forms are usually kept in the front office and must be readily available to any parent, student, teacher, or community member. Forms may also be posted on the district’s website. If not, a form can be obtained at: <http://www.static.kern.org/gems/ccsesaAtWork/CSBAComplaintForm2007.pdf>

Regarding the complaint process, Brooks Allen, ACLU attorney and co-counsel for the plaintiffs, said:

The Williams complaint process provides parents, students, teachers, and community members with an unprecedented remedial mechanism for ensuring schools and districts provide all students with the basic educational essentials required by Williams. Parents are empowered to identify problems and have them fixed within 30–40 working days. With over 2,800 complaints filed in just the first two and a half years, it is clear parents are seizing the opportunity and making the most of it. For example, last year, at Compton High School, parents’ complaints led to heat being restored to classrooms and broken windows being fixed.

We all agree that *Williams* legislation sets a base—not a ceiling—for what our schools need to be doing on behalf of our children. Williams has provided educational stakeholders with valuable tools to ensure that base is met. That stakeholder group most definitely includes parents!

Education Commission