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TEACH CHILDREN TO READ? HIGHER EDUCATION IS LENDING A HAND

By Richard C. Atkinson and Charles B. Reed
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Gov. Gray Davis has challenged the California State University and the University of California to use their expertise to help the state's children learn to read by age nine.

We support the governor's challenge and intend to meet it head on.

Here's the situation: There are 5.7 million children in California's public schools today, and the state Department of Finance projects 300,000 additional K-12 students over the next five years. Add to that the growing demand for more teachers precipitated by class size reduction in grades K-3 and the burgeoning number of teacher retirements, and what emerges is the need to hire 12,500 additional elementary teachers a year through 2007.

The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing has indicated that thousands of California's teachers are in our classrooms holding only an emergency permit or a waiver. This means that many new "teachers" are not knowledgeable in subject matter content or how to teach that subject to children, have not entered or have only partially completed a teacher preparation program, or have had all requirements waived because of special situations.

The University of California, the California State University and the public schools of California have the expertise in their faculty and in experienced K-12 teachers. Higher education and the public schools have conducted substantial research into what works and what does not work in the classroom. We intend to build on that research-based knowledge and apply it to the needs of beginning uncredentialed teachers entering California's classrooms this fall.

Working with some of the best public school teachers, the UC and CSU will set up two- to three-week summer preparation institutes for teams of teachers and administrators at 25 CSU and UC campuses around the state. Instruction will come from the ranks of university faculty members and leading elementary school teachers associated with the California reading and literature projects - two established programs that have improved teacher training over the years.

The emphasis in the first year will be on the teaching of reading and will shift to mathematics during the second year. Those two subject areas are the keys to developing a strong academic foundation.

This statewide effort, called the Initiative in Elementary Reading and Mathematics Teaching, represents an unprecedented level of cooperation among our institutions, our faculty and leading public school teachers. By working together we estimate we can lift the teaching skills of 6,000 of California's newest teachers each summer.

In addition to the training for the inexperienced teachers, concurrent summer institutes at the same sites will focus on developing the leadership of experienced teachers so that they can serve as mentors for their less-experienced colleagues. These teachers will go into schools monthly to work with the school teams in providing support through demonstration lessons, coaching, mentoring, and analysis of test data assessing students' reading performance.

Follow-up to the coursework will be provided as schools track and evaluate the impact of the program on students. The UC Nexus K-12 Technology Initiative will provide current research, exemplary course materials, specific course modules and even lesson plans on its Website. The initiative is exciting. It shows that California's public universities and its public schools can work together to achieve a common objective.

The UC-CSU summer institutes will emphasize in-the-classroom pragmatism in mathematics and reading, with the emphasis on using phonics as the basis for teaching youngsters how to read. The goal, again, is a challenging one: to have all California public school pupils reading by age nine.

Good teaching is at the heart of good education. The CSU and UC are hopeful that the quality of instruction in reading will be improved as a result of their summer institutes.

Richard C. Atkinson is president of the University of California; Charles B. Reed is chancellor of the California State University.