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Another view

Simitian's bill is good investment in state teachers

By Mike Smith and Kristi Kimball

Silicon Valley has long recognized the role of education in developing the 21st-century workforce we need to keep our economy productive. For years, leaders in high-tech industry have supported efforts to improve our schools.

This year, Silicon Valley watched closely as the Legislature debated school spending increases, governance questions for Los Angeles, and other

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high-profile bills. Yet hidden among these headlines was a measure its own author calls, "boring, but important," that would affect billions of dollars in state education investments. The bill, SB 1614 by state Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, would create a statewide teacher workforce database.

This relatively low-profile measure could dramatically improve our ability to use education funding effectively and to ensure that every student has a highly qualified teacher. Currently, we don't even know how many of our lowest-performing students are being taught by teachers who are less than fully certified, or are being taught by math and science teachers who are teaching out of field.

Simply trying to monitor compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act and the Williams settlement is far more difficult and costly without this basic information infrastructure in place, and finding the best solutions is

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even harder.

What's astonishing, in light of the fact that the state has made significant

investments in teacher professional development since 2001, is what we don't know about the money we spend training teachers. Do these training programs help us keep high-quality teachers in tough schools, where they are needed most? What kinds of teachers are taking advantage of the training? California policy-makers regularly direct millions of dollars for teacher training without knowing the most basic facts about the state teacher workforce.

As it stands, teacher data is inaccessible for statewide purposes because the data is distributed across hundreds of local databases throughout the state. SB 1614 would take the next step toward creating a system to

compile the data necessary for analysis to inform policy-making at the state level, while protecting the privacy of teachers.

Other states, such as Texas, Florida, Connecticut and Georgia, have established statewide teacher data systems. This year, California lawmakers sent Sen. Simitian's bill to the governor on a wave of solid bipartisan support. SB 1614 is a good bill for all Californians. With a setup cost of \$9 million and \$2 million annually to run, the database would enable program evaluation to ensure that taxpayer dollars are used effectively, and it would help bring our education data systems into the 21st century, very fitting in the high-tech capital of the nation.