

608

Riles: No 'Simple Answers'

For Education

By Sigrid Bathen
Bee Staff Writer

Polls show that Californians are terribly concerned about two things: crime and schools.

In the crime arena, they urge stiffer sentences but balk at spending money to build more prisons.

In education, the citizenry clamors too for panaceas. Wilson Riles' most active opponent, state Board of Education member Louis "Bill" Honig Jr., once a Riles ally and now the first to announce officially against Riles for state superintendent of public instruction, talks about returning stern discipline and basic education to the schools.

Yet Honig wrote in a 1979 Bee article that "our schools serve us well" and praised Riles' School Improvement Program.

Saying he is hamstrung by bureaucracy, money and the law, Riles contends that the superintendent realistically can do little more than exert influence and has virtually no say in discipline or even curriculum, which is largely set by local school boards. A major focus of a pending state Auditor-General/Little Hoover Commission report on education will be to clarify the role of the state superintendent in a system torn by the financial chaos of Proposition 13.

Riles says he, like each teacher, is a convenient scapegoat for public disaffection with the schools.

Honig, scion of a powerful San Francisco advertising family, has established a "Quality Education Committee" to run his campaign against Riles. This prompts Riles aide Marion Joseph to remark dryly: "Of course, he's for quality and we're against it. Hah!"

* * *

Californians are among the top in per capita income nationwide. State education officials note that California ranks 44th nationwide in state contributions to public education — right behind Mississippi, Riles is fond of saying.

A mere 10 years ago, according to education department figures, California was fourth in per-capita contributions to public education.

There are more than 7,000 public schools in California, and the state schools budget is nearly \$10 billion, one-third of the entire state budget. Of that figure, in 1980-81, according to state education officials, \$117 million goes to administer the department. The bulk of that \$117 million goes to operate two state schools for the handicapped, which employ more than half of the department's 2,000-plus employees.

Test scores of third-graders in the elementary schools, where Riles, a former elementary teacher, has concentrated his legislative efforts, have gone up during his administration, from the 50th percentile in national comparisons 10 years ago to 58 last year. Sixth grade scores also have risen, from 50 in 1971 to 56 in 1980.

No statewide measure of student performance is made between the sixth and 12th grades, despite the pleadings of Riles' test experts. But there is no money forthcoming from the financially strapped state Legislature for eighth-grade testing.

The scores of 12th graders have been steadily dropping below the national average during the Riles administration, from 49 in 1971 to 41 in 1980. Riles expresses frequent and vehement concern about that drop, but says the reasons, and potential solutions, are complex, tied to social and financial ills, family dislocation, drugs, television.



Bee photo by Owen Brewer

Wilson Riles visits enrichment program class in Lafayette.

Educational disagreements get particularly vicious when it comes down to responsibility for those scores. Honig says Riles has not provided aggressive leadership. "Honig," says Riles, "knows better."

"Americans keep looking for that one button, in education or elsewhere, which they can push to make everything right," Riles says wearily. "Although it sounds good to have The Answer, education is too complex for simple answers. It is not easy to explain that to people because they still, subconsciously or otherwise, want a simple answer."

"There is no simple answer. These are difficult times. Difficult financially, socially. Kids are confused. Their parents are confused. It all requires a mutual effort among parents, teachers — and kids, who too often are not consulted — to get it moving again."

"I could get out there and demagogue very easily. I could blame the problems on this or that factor, this or that person or group of persons. But I can't do that and I will not do that, even to win."

* * *

Democratic Assemblyman Gary Hart is a former teacher from Santa Barbara and a longtime member of the Assembly Education Committee. He makes no secret of the fact that he wanted Wilson Riles' job. When Riles surprised a lot of people by deciding to run for a fourth term, Hart respectfully and promptly withdrew.

"Education is something people feel very strongly about," says Hart with some understatement. "On balance, Wilson has done a good job. He has done things I might have done differently, but he really cares about kids and is a man of basic integrity and good will."

Linda Bond, consultant to the Assembly Education Committee for more than six years, describes Riles' upper-echelon administrators as "true believers," people who believe deeply in Riles' programs. "True believers can be a problem," she said. "They are very evangelistic. But I'd much rather deal with people who care, than with those who don't. In Wilson, the passion for education is real."

"The Department of Education is a massive operation, and Riles deserves enormous credit for such programs as Early Childhood Education, School Improvement, the Master Plan for Special Education. The notion of not pigeonholing kids, California started that, Riles started that."

Sen. Paul Carpenter is a Democrat from Orange County, immediate past chairman of the Senate Education Committee and a vocal Riles critic. He believes, like Bill Honig, that Riles has presided over the demise of public education in California.

Carpenter especially does not like Riles' top aide and troubleshooter, Marion Joseph, who periodically organizes constituents in Carpenter's district to raise hell with the senator whenever he introduces what is perceived as anti-Education Department legislation. Carpenter gets very annoyed by those calls, which he says are replete with "misinformation."

"They're his constituents," Marion Joseph says. "And Wilson Riles' constituents."

Carpenter thinks Riles "has lost interest in California schools; at this point in time he's been there too long."

Asked to specify his criticisms of the Riles administration, Carpenter, like many others in the Legislature, cited Riles' cherished School Improvement Program, initiated three years into his administration as Early Childhood Education.

Carpenter, and others, say the program doesn't work to improve performance in those schools where it has been established (participation is voluntary). Carpenter and the anti-SIP contingent in the Legislature produce reams of reports they say show the failure of ECE/SIP. Riles' department produces equally voluminous reports to dispute those findings.

Carpenter says his chairmanship of the education committee "gave me a window on what I thought was the very poor job the state department was doing, and a window on their terrible defensiveness."

"If things were going well, why should they be defensive? Things are not going well."

What about so-called "external factors" — family dislocation, inflation, immigration, social changes, too much television, poor teacher training, poverty, declining enrollment?

"To be fair to Riles, I think there is a little bit of validity to his argument that external factors are to blame. But Riles could and should have done something.."

* * *

The Vallecito Elementary School nestles in the loud curve of a freeway. The landscape in this well-off neighborhood in suburban Lafayette is lush and rolling, quite unlike the blanched and tract-studded hills of nearby Concord, where Riles spoke to a crowd of parents the night before.

The school has the atmosphere of a place where kids are learning, teachers teaching. A lot of that has to do with the fervor of the administrators and teachers, lending credence to the notion that they make the real difference, that nothing can really happen in a school if the fervor isn't there.

Superintendent Jim Martin is a self-proclaimed nut about reading

706
and, especially, writing. Penmanship and spelling are important; the kids write neatly, test scores are high.

These are smart kids, well-scrubbed, largely white and middle- or upper-middle class.

Vallecito is also one of 3,276 California schools in Riles' School Improvement Program, which began in 1973 as Early Childhood Education in kindergarten through third grades in selected schools, many of them the worst in California. ECE began with a modest budget of \$25 million.

In 1977, it was expanded to include pupils from kindergarten through 12th grade, although all but 200 of the schools in the program are elementary. The 1980-81 budget for SIP is \$152.4 million, less than 3 per cent of the total state schools budget.

Wilson Riles believes deeply in SIP. He cites improved test scores among elementary students, particularly in badly disadvantaged schools.

Overall, department testing coordinator Dave Gordon said the test scores of third-graders in SIP schools rose at a rate nearly double that of children's test scores in non-SIP schools between 1976 and 1980. Using a complicated metric computing system that he says is not easily transferable to percentile test scores, Gordon said the test scores of children in SIP schools rose an average of 12 "points," compared to a 7-point rise for children in non-SIP schools.

Riles' research chief, Alexander Law, responds to criticism of SIP, notably in a study of the program by UCLA researchers, by saying that you can't expect radical improvements in test scores for some years.

Many of the schools receiving SIP money are those with the lowest test scores in the state. "Otherwise," says Riles' press secretary Vic Biondi, "the program would be a sham." Because of that factor, Riles and Law note, a lower-than-average SIP test score is inevitable. Gordon said no figures were immediately available that compared raw test scores of children in SIP and non-SIP schools.

A central criticism made by the UCLA study was that the test scores of ECE/SIP children did not substantially differ from those of children whose schools did not participate in the program, a criticism hotly disputed by Riles staff, who say the UCLA researchers "misinterpreted the facts."

"Having started at a much lower level," Gordon said, "the children in SIP schools have caught up to a considerable degree."

Vallecito School, which recently received a "perfect" score in a state review of its SIP program, is hardly a disadvantaged school. But parents and teachers are unstinting in their praise of the Vallecito SIP. Riles made a special point last month of visiting the school with the perfect score.

"At first I was critical of the program," said Vallecito mother Dorothy Harrington, a former teacher who does volunteer work at the school. "I mean, I had taught 35 kids without an aide! Now, I am so impressed. I have seen tremendous

improvements in the younger children, in the way they read, the way they write an essay. If people would only see what we are able to do. They criticize SIP without ever seeing its results in the classroom."

SIP is strictly voluntary. It provides funds for enriched programs and is administered at the local level. Riles ran for state superintendent in 1970 on a platform of increased parental participation, and he sees SIP as the supreme expression of that goal.

"Actually, it has had mixed results," says Assembly Education Committee consultant Bond, who wrote the SIP law. "It has led to real improvements and it is the ultimate in local control. It sets up a process that involves the people closest to the school, kids, parents and teachers, who try then to modify the schools to the individual needs of kids."

"To people who criticize it, I ask, what else do they suggest?"

At Vallecito, Wilson Riles is in his element. He moves gracefully around the rooms, easing his 6-foot-4 frame to the level of small children. His booming voice soft and modulated, he smiles, compliments their superb penmanship, asks them questions, always listening patiently for their answers.

"I can sense the tone and the feeling when I go into a classroom where kids are learning," Riles tells the teachers, who are hungry like beleaguered public school teachers everywhere for some recognition, some praise. "I feel it here. We need more of what you're doing."

"We see all the negatives; the airwaves are filled with the negatives. We have problems all over; I don't deny the problems. We are a very diverse state.

"But we have to see the successes."

8 of 8