

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Carrot or stick for new teachers?

[Louis Freedberg](#)

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IF THE PROBLEM were so severe, you would think Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger would not have to put out inaccurate information to support his argument that bad teachers are responsible for the shortcomings of our public schools.

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Last week, he again declared his support for an initiative extending the probationary period for new teachers from two to five years. His "California Recovery Team" claimed in a press release that "once California's public school teachers have completed just two years on the job, they are guaranteed a job for life regardless of performance."

That's just not true. Section 44932 (4) of California's Education Code presents a long list of grounds to dismiss a teacher, including "unsatisfactory performance."

Actually, teachers have to undergo regular evaluations -- and can be booted out for any reason during their first two years. After that, they have to be evaluated every two years -- and renew their credential every five years by participating in a minimum of 150 hours of "professional development" training.

None of this is mentioned by Schwarzenegger and his anti-teacher allies. In fact, the initiative he has endorsed seems to run at cross-purposes to a massive state program intended to keep as many new teachers on the job as possible, while helping them teach as effectively as possible.

As of January this year, every new teacher has to participate in the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment program, or BTSA, in order to become fully credentialed. Its core element is to link an outstanding "mentor" teacher with a new teacher during his or her first two years on the job. The mentor works with about 15 teachers, meeting with each for an average of two hours every week, while doing regular assessments of the teachers' performance. (Teachers refer to it as "Bitsa.")

There are 150 BTSA programs throughout the state -- involving some 20, 000 new teachers. This year the state will spend \$87 million on the program --

or \$3,500 on each teacher. With matching school district funds, we spend more than \$10,000 on each new teacher over two years to make sure he or she is fully qualified and effective before he or she can receive a "clear" teaching credential.

One of them is Cindy Deetz, a special-education teacher at North Monterey County High School in Castroville. She is now in her third year of teaching. She told me that without the help of her mentor, Marilyn Torp, she would have abandoned her efforts to be a teacher. "I absolutely wouldn't be doing this today if it weren't for Marilyn," she says. "She knows almost everything there is to know about special ed."

During her first year as teacher at another school, she was assigned a case-load of 27 children, many with serious behavior problems. Despite her work with teenage drug addicts and other problem children for many years in Canada, she found the workload "unbearable." The principal, she said, was very supportive -- but he did not have a background in special education to help her.

Torp, she said, was a genius in helping her navigate the system. "The whole system is so convoluted that by the time you have written your first Individual Education Plan, you don't know what end is up," she said.

Deetz's mentor came from the New Teacher Program at UC Santa Cruz -- regarded as the best of its kind in the nation. The program is working with 750 new teachers in 26 South Bay school districts alone. It is so widely recognized that it has contracts with districts in 29 other states to do similar work.

Studies show that, typically, nearly 50 percent of teachers drop out within five years. By contrast, more than 90 percent of those who have gone through the Santa Cruz program stay in teaching. Many end up becoming exemplary teachers in their own schools.

Those are the kinds of numbers, and results, California will need just to replace the 100,000 teachers expected to retire over the next decade. "One of the best things we can do is invest in the early years of a teacher's career," says Ellen Moir, the founder and director of the Santa Cruz program.

Precisely. Yet Schwarzenegger is expected to call a special election today asking voters to make teachers more vulnerable to dismissal -- even as he admits that most teachers are doing a "spectacular" job.

It makes no sense at all.

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