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NEWS-5

Silicon Valley decries state's weak schools

By Abbi Kaplan
STAFF WRITER

MOUNTAIN VIEW — Side-stepping the issue of computers in schools at a "digital divide" conference Thursday, about 200 educators and Silicon Valleyites attacked California's education record but promised to "intensify the passion" to teach students.

"We are in a crisis in this valley... if all students can't master high school math and science, they'll never get jobs at Microsoft or Intel," said Intel spokeswoman Rosalind Hudnell.

By under-funding public education, the state has under-educated and undermined minority students' ability to compete for technology and other jobs, several educators and corporate representatives said.

Organized as an open forum, the meeting gave teachers, students and elected officials a chance to air their views on the question of what's wrong with public schools.

The nonprofit Joint Venture Silicon Valley, which creates partnerships between schools and technology companies, sponsored the all-day summit at Microsoft Corp., which donated food and its facilities for the event.

"You more than anyone have a sense of urgency about this issue," said State Senator John Vasconcellos, addressing the high-tech companies.

The senator was recently named chairman of the state's education committee and estimated that California's inability to educate and graduate local Latinos and African-Americans from college costs Silicon Valley

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\$3 billion each year in lost jobs and revenues.

Although he pledged to make educators more aware of the importance of educating "every child and the whole child," Vasconcellos said he had no control over public school funding.

"It's something I'll be working on," he said.

Currently only 34 percent of the state's education budget goes toward teachers' salaries,

according to Stanford Education Professor Linda Darling-Hammond. That's about \$25 million as compared to \$200 million in Connecticut, a state that has boosted minority students' achievement significantly, she said.

By not focusing enough resources on teachers' salaries, Hammond said the state has undercut teachers' abilities to stay up-to-date on training and

curriculum. It has also forced them to spend less time on individual students and teach the same outdated information from year to year.

"In most countries, kids stay in one class with one teacher for at least four years," said Hammond, who added that low-performing kids should be placed with the best qualified teachers.

That is often not the case for most minority students, she said. According to her research, Latinos and African-Americans are "two times as likely to be assigned to the least effective teachers."

She also criticized the typical "factory" model that most schools follow. As if sending the kids through an assembly line of courses all day, schools spend little time teaching subjects and skills thoroughly.

Not all the talk was as

gloomy, however.

Menlo-Atherton High School student Rashonda Brown spoke about her experience in the RISE program for African-American students at the school. By working on all subjects in small groups, with a qualified instructor, Brown said her grades had improved significantly in four years.

"There's just a lot of opportunities opened up for us," she said, proudly adding, "I'm going to college."

Gail Ortega, director of International and Multicultural programs at Menlo College in Atherton is focusing on increasing African-American and Latino students' enrollment. He said he hopes the conference will help schools "bridge the gap" between minority and white students' achievement in the Bay Area.