

"California schools believe their own lies"

*By Alan Bonsteel and Carl Brodt
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No excuse for the meltdown of California's public schools has been flogged more enthusiastically by the public school establishment than the alleged lack of money."

We've been solemnly assured, time and again, that Proposition 13 resulted in cutbacks in public school spending, and we have been warned darkly that we rank 49th of the 50 states, "just ahead of Mississippi" in per-student funding.

But, per student spending in constant, inflation-adjusted dollars has increased 39 percent in the 22 years since Proposition 13 was passed, and has now hit an all-time record. As a result, we're now just barely below the national average in per student spending.

Last fall, our organization, California Parents for Educational Choice, released the results of an exhaustive study of California's public school spending, which we documented as having shot up to within \$500 per student of the national average.

And, as it turned out, some of the state's most dysfunctional public school districts were among the biggest spenders. For example, the state's largest school district, Los Angeles Unified School District, benefits from a princely \$11,000 per year in tax money for each of its students.

It nevertheless has failed to put textbooks into the hands of even half of its students, and has failed to provide working toilets for many of them. Most of the money is disappearing into an administrative black hole.

The California Teachers Association has spent millions on an initiative for the November ballot to raise California's per-student public school spending to the national average. The gap they have trumpeted is \$1,000 per student.

On Feb. 17, however, the state legislative analyst released a report estimating that gap at \$460 per student, give or take \$90. With California's supercharged economy easily outpacing the rest of the nation, and 1988's Proposition 98 mandating that we spend 40 percent of the state budget on K-12 public schools, we are closing the gap so quickly that, even if the CTA initiative passes, it will have almost no effect on California's public school spending.

How could the CTA make such a colossal mistake and waste so many millions on an initiative that will now serve only as embarrassment to them?

In part, the CTA had been lying about California's public school spending for so long that it finally started to believe its own lies. And the California public school establishment has so many phony definitions of spending that it almost certainly ended

up comparing its own phony numbers to the more accurate national figures. For example, the often-quoted \$6,313 per student spending figure for California ignores so many big-ticket items such as the cost of building schools and interest payments on school bonds that the real figure of more than \$7,500 per student dwarfs the phony number by a whopping \$1,200.

If it were only money the public school lied about, that would be bad enough. But we're also still being lied to about dropout rates, which are 10 times higher than the figures the California Department of Education was trying to pass off, until our organization blew the whistle last year. Incidents of violence in our public schools are being systematically suppressed. And test scores are being cooked, sometimes even through heavy-handed cheating by the very teachers who are supposed to instill honesty in our kids. Even attendance rates have been phoned lately, to bring in more state average daily attendance money.

We're nearing a day of reckoning for the public school monopoly. A disillusioned public will soon vote to replace a corrupt public school bureaucracy that can't even get its story straight, with a system of school choice producing real results that no one needs to lie about.

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