

Opinion:

California Focus: Spending more, getting less

Per-pupil spending in public schools sets new high, as does dropout rate.

By Alan Bonsteel, Orange County Register, August 29, 2007

The 51-day-late state budget signed Aug. 24 by Gov. Schwarzenegger appropriates a record \$11,584 per student in grades K-12.

One of the fiscal hurdles in hammering out a budget was indirectly erected by the tidal wave of high school dropouts from California's public schools who are contributing to the overflow of convicts in our prisons, forcing huge increases in state spending on prisons. In May, the California Department of Education was forced to admit that our 2006 high school dropout rate hit a high for the decade, 33 percent, up from 29 percent in 2005, largely as a result of thousands of high school seniors being unable to pass an eighth-grade-level exit exam.

The public school crisis that is producing so many dropouts, many of whom wind up in prison, and straining the state budget also has affected higher education, with the once-nearly-free University of California system now forced to charge its in-state students fees of over \$8,000 a year.

The correct statewide K-12 per student spending of \$11,584 per year can be verified on the Web site of the Governor's Office of the Secretary of Education at www.ose.ca.gov. By contrast, voters, taxpayers and parents trying to find accurate per-student spending on the California Department of Education Web site will encounter a lowball figure of \$8,524 per year. That highly deceptive number is the "Proposition 98" figure, named after the 1988 ballot measure that guaranteed 40 percent of our state tax money for public schools. The Prop. 98 number leaves off the costs of school construction, interest on school bonds and teacher retirement payments. All of these are big-ticket items, and yet there is no hint on them on the Education Department Web site.

The Education Department also long has misled about the direction of spending trends. We have been told over and over again that "cutbacks" since 1978 as a result of Proposition 13 are behind the catastrophe in our public schools. In fact, federal figures show that from 1978-2003, California per-student public school spending *increased* 44.6 percent, even adjusted for inflation.

As the \$3 million Stanford study of California's public schools pointedly observed in March, "More money in the current system without significant reforms is unlikely to result in students meeting challenging state standards."

Meanwhile, the one shining light in California public education is our charter schools, publicly funded schools of choice that are governed by parents and teachers, where most of the money goes directly into the classroom. Within charter schools, families can choose from an array of attractive options, including Montessori schools, Waldorf schools, schools of the arts or the sciences, or schools of ethnic pride. This freedom of choice in education gives families a sense of belonging, of community, even of family. As a result, examples of California charter schools abound in which not only *every* student who began as a freshman four years ago walked across the graduation stage this year to proudly claim a high school diploma, but *all* were accepted into college. This achievement is all the more remarkable in that California's charter schools serve a greater percentage of disadvantaged families than our traditional public schools.

During the budget negotiations, the mantra of some legislators was an insistence on "fully funding" our public schools, meaning following to the letter the mandates of Prop. 98. However, "fully funding" our public schools has never meant fair funding for our public charter schools, which outperform traditional public schools with only about three-quarters the per-student funding.

In February, Utah passed the holy grail of school reformers, a statewide school-choice law that will serve as a beacon of hope for the rest of the nation. Our neighbor Arizona already has several private school-choice programs for disadvantaged kids, as well as the nation's most charter schools per capita. And Nevada appears likely to soon pass a statewide school choice program for children with special needs.

California will thus shortly be surrounded by reform states that will show us the way and hopefully prod us into action. The pioneering school-choice programs throughout the United States will soon move California to meaningful school reform, and a recognition of educational freedom of choice as the fundamental human right that it is.

Alan Bonsteel is president of California Parents for Educational Choice, at www.cpeconline.org.