

## *Editorial*

### *State Budget Favors Schools*

*Spending on students near record high, yet scores remain dismal*

*By*

*Alan Bonsteel and Peter Hanley*

*Los Angeles Daily News, September 20, 2002*

On Sept. 5, Gov. Gray Davis signed the state's new budget, a mere two months late. A record \$24 billion tax shortfall caused by the meltdown of the high-technology stock-market bubble forced draconian cuts almost everywhere, but K-12 education remained almost untouchable.

Because of 1988s Proposition 98, which enacted minimum levels for funding of our public schools, K-12 per student spending was preserved at a near-record high, only very slightly below last year's level.

Almost all of us would agree that in a budget crunch, the kids should come first. But it's entirely appropriate to ask how much we are really paying, and what we are getting for our money.

There are probably no budget numbers more completely misunderstood by the public than California K-12 spending rates. The misinformation that 1978's tax-cutting Proposition 13 resulted in cutbacks in California per student spending is pervasive. In fact, California K-12 per student spending rates are now up by more than 40 percent in constant, inflation-adjusted dollars since 1978.

We've also been told, over and over, that California ranks 49th out of the 50 states in per student spending, just ahead of Mississippi. In fact, the latest National Center for Education Statistics rankings show us 30th of the 50 states, and the latest National Education Association rankings peg us at an even-better 29th.

Those of us who care about education would like, of course, to see us much higher still in the rankings, but the notion that we are far behind the other states is clearly false. Finally, even the per-student spending figures coming out of the California Department of Education now are wrong. The numbers quoted to the public are almost always what are known as the Proposition 98 figures, based upon the extraordinarily narrow definition of per student spending in that initiative.

The Proposition 98 number leaves out the big-ticket items of school construction, interest payments on school bonds, teacher retirement, lottery money, and federal aid to education. This year's Proposition 98 spending figure will be about \$7,000 per student.

The number that really counts, however, is the total expenditure number - the all-inclusive tab that the taxpayer ponies up. That number will come to around \$9,000 per child for the next academic year, or \$270,000 per year for a typical classroom of 30.

It's bad enough that the politicians have been lying to us about how much we have been spending, but equally bad is the utter lack of results for our money. Let's look: In 2000-01 the California State University had to ship 45 percent of its freshmen to bonehead math courses, a near-record number. Even without accounting for the upward bias of having the weakest third of our students dropping out, our students who are closest to high school graduation show the weakest STAR test scores. Despite being dumbed down repeatedly to about a 9th-grade level, the scores on our high school exit exam have been so horrible that if it is ever administered in a way that counts, huge numbers of our kids will not graduate.

It's time for us to demand the truth about how much money we've been spending on our K-12 schools. And, now that we've had a glimpse of how much money we've really been spending, it's time to demand meaningful reform of our public schools and real results.