

Editorial
School spending: honesty, please

By
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Orange County Register, August 6, 2003

At long last, the Legislature has reacted to the worst fiscal crisis in the state's history by passing a desperation budget. It is full of accounting tricks, but allows us to stagger into the next fiscal year. Newspapers throughout the state have reported the latest K-12 per student spending figure, alleged to be \$6,887.

That number, in fact, is false. It is the "Proposition 98" figure, named after the initiative passed in 1988 that set minimum annual per-student spending mandates in California. It leaves off about \$2,000 in big-ticket items, including interest on school bonds, federal aid to education and teacher retirement. California's real annual per-student spending this year will be about \$9,200, or \$276,000 per year for a typical classroom of 30.

The harsh reality is that hardly anything we have been told about public school spending is true. For example, we are told that "cutbacks" following the 1978 passage of Prop. 13 were responsible for the decline of California's public schools. In fact, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Education, per-student spending in California grew 25.8 percent in constant, inflation-adjusted dollars in the 20 years following Prop. 13.

At the federal level, things are better, but not much. Last year, our organization, California Parents for Educational Choice, lobbied the Bush administration to provide the public with accurate per-student spending numbers at the federal and state level. As a result, this year, for the first time, those numbers can be viewed on the U.S. Department of Education Web site, and soon they will be available in federal reference materials.

Unfortunately, they are 4-year-old numbers. In 1999-2000, national K-12 per student spending was \$8,032. It now must be over \$9,000 per student. Thus, throughout the United States, our public schools are spending as much per student as even the most exclusive and expensive private schools.

Here in California, more truthful numbers would have an especially crucial impact on what will happen to our charter schools. These public schools of choice have been the one ray of light in a public school system that has attracted nationwide attention for its dysfunctionality. Almost all of California's charter schools have long waiting lists because of the superior education that they provide. What most California voters don't realize, however, is that these charter schools are providing this improved quality on about 70 percent of the per-student spending of our traditional public schools. They are able to accomplish this by channeling their money into the classroom rather than wasting it on the many layers of bureaucracy running our traditional public schools.

California's crisis budget lurches into the next fiscal year with an automatic \$8 billion deficit. Had we converted all of our traditional public schools to charter schools, the savings would have been so great as to more than eliminate that deficit.

That won't happen overnight, of course. But at a time when we must dramatically improve California education while dealing with an ongoing budget crunch, we should be encouraging as many new charter

schools as possible. Instead, the special interest groups, most importantly the California Teachers Association, are standing in the schoolhouse door to keep kids from escaping dysfunctional public schools.

California's budget problems will be with us for years to come. To know how to deal with those problems and still make progress on beginning to provide our children with a quality education, we need accurate data. We might start by asking the California Department of Education to give us per-student spending numbers that are within \$1,000 or so of the truth.

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