

## ***'Cutbacks' aren't schools' problem***

*By*

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It's hard to pick up a newspaper these days without reading stories about cutbacks in our public schools. Almost everywhere, art and music, sports, counselors and librarians are being slashed. In four years, the number of the state's 1,056 districts in danger of defaulting on their bills has almost quadrupled, from 15 to 57.

Is this a reflection of the cash-strapped state's budget crisis? Of course, in part it is. But the problem with blaming all of the failures on budget "cutbacks" is that per-student spending in kindergarten through 12th grade is at near-record levels in California.

One of the big lies propagated by our public-schools establishment is that there have been cutbacks since the 1978 passage of the tax-cutting Proposition 13. In fact, state income tax revenue so quickly supplanted the property taxes cut by Proposition 13 that by 1998, 20 years later, California's per-student spending in constant, inflation-adjusted dollars had increased 26 percent, according to the official numbers from the National Center for Educational Statistics.

Even a glance at the state legislative analyst's summary of the education budget [www.lao.ca.gov](http://www.lao.ca.gov) makes clear that K-12 public education has largely been spared from cutbacks as a result of Proposition 98, the 1988 initiative that put a floor under public school spending. Federal aid to education has increased dramatically in recent years, and local governments have benefited from rapidly rising property taxes. This year, the Schwarzenegger administration announced that K-12 per-student spending had reached \$9,614 -- the kind of money that even the most exclusive, tony private schools charge.

Why, then, the slashings in school services?

First, our public schools have expanded their bureaucracies for many decades, and continue to do so. There is now not a single large school district in the state -- not one -- in which teachers constitute a majority of the employees.

Next, special education continues to expand its piece of the pie. While this sounds like a benign explanation, it isn't.

Increasingly, children who have normal intelligence, but who have simply not been taught to read by our dysfunctional public schools, have been dumped into special-education classes. School districts that engage in this practice get supplementary funding from the state, one of the most tragic, perverse incentives in the system. This mislabeling

has been inflicted most heavily on our minority communities, as anyone who takes the time to visit a special-ed classroom will see.

Another factor is demographics. After years of increasing K-12 enrollment, California's school-age population is starting to level off, and in some districts enrollment is actually decreasing.

Some of the districts that now bemoan funding "cutbacks" don't mention that they're also serving fewer students. And when public schools have to choose between classroom spending and laying off the administrative assistant of the deputy assistant superintendent, it's always full employment for adults that wins over what's best for the kids.

Finally, public school boards, operating under the assumption that the growth in tax revenues generated by the dot-com boom would continue indefinitely, in recent years committed districts to providing large increases in the salaries of school employees. Thanks to these raises, which were not tied to improvements in quality of instruction, California's public school teachers became the best paid in the United States while our K-12 public schools remained among the nation's worst.

California's charter schools, by contrast, are doing an excellent job on about 70 percent of the per-student funding of our public schools, and our private schools are doing the same with an average of about half the per-student funding of the government-run schools. If that information were widely known, the clamor for more charter schools and vouchers for private schools would be irresistible.

And that's precisely why we won't get accurate information on the increases in K-12 spending from the public school establishment. Its members know that their monopoly will last only as long as the truth is hidden.

It's long past time for the voters to know the truth about our public school spending. Our children deserve what we're paying for.

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