

OPINION

## **Prop. 30 hikes taxes without fixing K-12 systemic flaws**

By Lance T. Izumi, Orange County Register, October 30, 2012

As Gov. Jerry Brown scurries around the state to save Proposition 30, his ballot measure to increase state sales and income taxes, voters are expressing skepticism that the tax revenues raised by the initiative will be spent wisely. They have reason to worry because Prop. 30 includes no reform of wasteful, inefficient and ineffective government programs, policies or practices.

The governor says that Prop. 30 tax dollars are especially needed for education. The problem, however, is that K-12 public education in California is replete with systemic flaws and Prop. 30 does absolutely nothing to correct any of them. As the non-partisan Legislative Analyst's Office says, the money from the tax increases "provide additional revenues to pay for programs funded in the state budget." That's it. No reforms – zip, nada – just more money to pay for the status quo. This huge omission is not surprising since top academic research shows that Jerry Brown has done little to fix the system's problems.

In 2007, Stanford University issued its massive "Getting Down to Facts" study of California public education. The study detailed major deficiencies in every aspect of education in the state: California's voluminous education code stifled flexibility and innovation; state spending policies, based on antiquated formulas, resulted in irrational funding disparities between school districts; and the teacher-evaluation system was weak and prevented the dismissal of ineffective teachers. No wonder then that the report concluded that more education spending would be futile until "extensive and systemic reforms" were enacted.

In May of this year, a report by a think tank sponsored by Stanford, UC Berkeley and the University of Southern California reviewed the original "Getting Down to Facts" findings and the subsequent actions and inactions by Sacramento. The report found that "many of the issues identified in Getting Down to Facts that were hindering education then, still apply today." Further, "The system is heavy on compliance and complexity and light on information and related opportunities

for improvement," and state policies "often hinder rather than help [school district] progress."

Specifically, researchers found that California continues to have an educational governance system that is weak in accountability, transparency, simplicity, flexibility and stability. Of particular concern, stakeholders surveyed for the report said that there had been no change in the huge influence of teacher unions over education system decisions and no change in the role of special interests in state-level policymaking.

In addition, Gov. Brown has fought against linking student-progress data with data on teachers. According to the report, he "vetoed state funding for the state-wide database on teachers, and chose not to apply for federal funding to link K-12, higher education and workforce data, thus limiting the development of a useful data system for California schools." The result has been that California "policy action continues to focus entirely on compliance with federal directives and requirements rather than strengthened accountability or system improvement."

Although the report notes that Gov. Brown has said, "I embrace both reform and tradition – not complacency," he and the Democratic majority in the Legislature haven't done much to follow through on those words. More important, he has not tried to follow through on his rhetoric by including in Prop. 30 any systemic reforms, many of which would likely be allowable under the lax judicial interpretation of the state's single-subject requirement for ballot measures, or by developing separate reform ballot measures.

In response to the original "Getting Down to Facts" study, one observer noted, "the problem is much more about the stupid way money is spent than the lack of money." Given that relatively little has changed in K-12 public education, especially during Jerry Brown's governorship, and given that Prop. 30 merely seeks to pour new tax dollars into that mostly unchanged and flawed system, it's no surprise to see support for the governor's initiative plunging among a justifiably skeptical electorate.

