

Opinion:

Improving public schools depends more on reform than money

By Carl Brodt and Alan Bonsteel, Los Angeles Daily News, October 27, 2012

CALIFORNIA'S November ballot has two measures - the Brown Initiative, Proposition 30, and the Munger Initiative, Proposition 38 - with the same concept: Raising taxes for our public schools to compensate for the cutbacks during the recession. But the real question is "Why are there no school reform issues on the ballot?"

Despite the cries of agony by the public school establishment about layoffs and library closings, even if both propositions fail, per student spending in 2012-13 will be about \$1,800 higher than in the 2002-03 school year, a level of spending which represents only a \$445 decline in constant, inflation-adjusted dollars in 10 years. The simple truth is that the total amount of money we are spending without both propositions - \$10,634 per student or about \$300,000 per year for a classroom of 30 for nine-month schools - is adequate to pay for world-class schools.

This figure is higher than the numbers commonly reported by the California Department of Education and California's teacher unions, which usually report "current dollar" spending figures, which do not count interest on school bonds, school construction costs, and employee retirement. The situation is rather like walking onto a new car lot and finding that the salesperson has quoted a price which does not include the engine, tires, or steering wheel.

Although multiple reasons exist for many California school districts finding themselves in what they view as dire straits, probably the leading one is that many school boards, often elected with the help of teachers' union donations, have long "given away the store" to district employees. Just as bloated pensions drove the cities of Stockton and San Bernardino to bankruptcy, so employee salaries and benefits have driven many public school districts toward insolvency. Additionally, the districts have often succumbed to union pressure to resist "best practices" which would allow them to reduce such costs.

The question remains, however, "Would higher per student spending, which would rescue such districts, automatically contribute to better academic performance?" The answer is, unfortunately, no.

Spending on our public schools has long correlated poorly with outcomes such as test scores and dropout rates. Recently the per-student spending of the Washington, D.C. public schools was pegged

by Andrew Coulson of the Cato Institute at an astounding \$29,409, a level confirmed by the Washington Post. The district had been able to conceal that spending previously because so much of that money is federal and comes from the District of Columbia. For all that spending, they get a school system so dysfunctional that not a single member of Congress enrolls his or her children in D.C. schools.

What has worked to improve test scores and dropout rates, and with less per student spending, are more charter schools and private school voucher programs such as those in Cleveland and Milwaukee. The latter plans are modelled on the highly successful educational voucher programs at the national level such as the G.I. Bill of Rights and Pell Grants.

Both the Brown and the Munger initiatives propose to hand out more tax money to our schools without demanding any new reform at all - no new school choice, no end to the tenure system that makes it impossible to keep the best teachers and let go of the worst, and no efforts to reduce school bureaucracy.

Nothing is more crucial to the future of our Golden State than to save our K-12 schools. Unfortunately, that task will now have to wait for the next election cycle. And when the time comes, voters need to speak with one voice to the public school bureaucracy, and say: "If you want more money, give us reform."