



QUALITY GAP

Article:

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**The Bureaucrats Worry About Education Spending
Lagging Behind Spending in Other States. They *Ought*
To Worry About the Gap in Educational Quality.**

California's per pupil education spending must be increased to the national average of state education spending -- so say Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin and other politicians, implying that failure to do so will prove Californians are less committed to education than taxpayers in other states. The implication, of course, is ridiculous, for several reasons. Imagine a business, for instance, that tried to operate according to this rule: we'll spend as much as we can lay our hands on, thus guaranteeing the best end product and the most success! Such a business would quickly find, first, that more spending does not necessarily translate into better product and, second, that whatever improvements in quality the increased spending *did* achieve must be worth at least as much as they cost. If they are not, the product will cost more to produce than customers are willing to pay for it. The company will lose money and go out of business. That's why successful businesses devote themselves to producing their product by spending the *lowest amount necessary* to provide goods or services of comparable or better quality than customers receive from competitors. The best businesses provide better quality at *less* cost than their competitors. Similarly, per pupil spending in

California *beneath* the national average is *good* if the quality of education provided is acceptable.

This sort of talk annoys and upsets the apologists for California's disastrous K-12 educational *status quo*. It challenges their habit of using the budget to increase the power of their bureaucratic allies, to promote social engineering, or to feed special interests. For them, the more spending, the better. But relating K-12 spending to academic quality, by showing California taxpayers that they are getting little value for their money, could stiffen public resistance to throwing more dollars at public education without real reforms.

After all, the *academic performance* of California's public school children is not up to the national average, much less at an acceptable level. California graduates less than two-thirds of its public school students and less than half of those who *do* graduate are prepared for the requirements of either the job market or citizenship. More than half of California students who attend state universities have to take remedial courses because they failed to obtain in elementary and high school the basic skills required to do college work.

Sacramento politicians and their bureaucratic allies blame this poor record on the especially difficult educational challenges California faces, particularly the state's large proportion of non-English speaking children (though these same decision-makers avoid mentioning the role of bilingual education, whole language education, and a host of other failed programs in aggravating this challenge). Taxpayers, they predictably argue, should not expect comparable quality with less than comparable or even greater spending. This argument, as usual, presupposes a direct, unbreakable relationship between higher spending and improved academic performance, which the evidence, putting it mildly, does not support.

A recent Pacific Research Institute report, for example, contained district-by-district comparisons between projected 1999-2000 fiscal year, per-student spending and student academic performance. The chart above shows the percentage of each district's sixth graders whose 1999 reading and math test performance ranked at or above the national average:

	<i>Total Revenue/Student</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Math</i>
Sacramento City Unified	\$6,899	41%	50%
California Average	\$7,535	44%	50%
San Diego City Unified	\$1878	45%	50%
San Bernardino City Unified	\$7,885	25%	35%

Oakland Unified	\$7,933	24%	30%
Santa Ana Unified	\$7,962	15%	28%
Fresno Unified	\$7,994	30%	38%
San Jose Unified	\$8,372	45%	48%
Los Angeles Unified	\$9,029	24%	42%
San Francisco Unified	\$10,021	45%	56%
Los Angeles Unified	\$16,555	38%	33%

The real questions state decision-makers should ask *before* setting the state's K-12 budget are:

(1) why, apparently, no correlation exists between academic performance and greater public school spending, (2) what factors, including spending levels, actually *do* contribute to educational improvement, and (3) what will bring about the changes required to improve our schools.

But these questions are not even on state decision-makers' radar screens. The Legislative Analyst's Office recently reported the Department of Education and the California Teachers Association had been overstating its official estimates of the "spending gap" by as much as 100 percent! And if the Legislature adds as much per-pupil spending to Governor Davis's recommended 2000-2001 K-12 education budget as it added to last year's recommended budget (a strong possibility with a \$10 billion-and-growing surplus), California's per pupil spending gap will virtually disappear by the upcoming school year. Thus, seeing that this key excuse for public schools' academic failures may soon be gone, Superintendent Eastin simply upped the ante, saying: "You must go beyond just getting to the median in K-12 per-student spending. No vision, no strategic plan, no new direction. Just more and more money with no end in sight."

The Superintendent and her political fellow-travelers should stop talking in sound bites about investing in our children, cast aside the special interests whose empires rely absolutely upon maintaining the K-12 *status quo*, and get down and dirty in ending the system's inefficiency, waste, featherbedding, upside-down spending practices, and rotten priorities. They should abandon their view of the public as bumpkins, unable to see through even the simplest deceptions and incapable of participating in any real consideration of the issues. They should publicly air out the whole truth about the situation they themselves, or their bureaucratic soul mates, have created or, at least, condoned, and tell the people what they will do to fix the situation.

Otherwise, Californians will turn increasingly to policies that will force such fixes -- and the school choice movement will grow ever-stronger.