

Web Editorial:

STATE IN EPIC BUDGET BATTLE

**K-12 SCHOOLS TO RECEIVE
NEAR-RECORD FUNDING, BUT
RESULTS ARE STILL DISMAL**

**By Alan Bonsteel, M.D. and Peter Hanley
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The ongoing budget crisis, with a record \$24 billion shortfall in revenues, is leading to an unprecedented showdown around the July 1 constitutional deadline. Draconian cuts will be made almost everywhere, but one area remains untouchable: K-12 education. Because of 1988's Proposition 98, which enacted minimum levels for funding of our public schools, and California's belief that education is critical for the future, K-12 funding will remain at near-record levels.

Almost all of us would agree that in a budget crunch, the kids should come first. But what's our real investment and return?

No budget numbers are less understood by the public than California K-12 spending rates. The current per-student spending figures coming out of the California Department of Education are deceptive and misleading. The numbers quoted to the public are almost always what are known as the "Proposition 98" figures, based upon the extraordinarily narrow definition of per student spending in that initiative. The Prop. 98 number leaves out the big-ticket items of school construction, interest payments on school bonds, teacher retirement, lottery money, and federal aid to education. This year's Prop. 98 spending figure will be about \$7058 per student, a record number, and, in inflation-adjusted terms, second only to last year's all-time record high California K-12 per student spending.

The number that really counts, however, is the total expenditure number? the all-inclusive tab that the taxpayer ponies up. That number will come to around \$9000 per child for the next academic year, or \$270,000 per year for a typical classroom of 30!

Mark Twain once commented that it's not what we don't know that gets us in trouble; it's what we know that just ain't so. Many Californians "know" that the state ranks 49th out of 50 in education spending, "just ahead of Mississippi." In fact, some even cut the education establishment considerable slack in performance, partly out of guilt because taxpayers have treated it shabbily. But that statistic is a factoid. It "just ain't so."

The misperception that 1978's tax-cutting Proposition 13 resulted in "cutbacks" in California per student spending is pervasive. In fact, California K-12 per student spending rates since 1978 are up roughly 50% in constant, inflation-adjusted dollars. The latest National Center for Education Statistics rankings have us 30th of the 50 states, and the latest National Education Association rankings peg us at an even-better 29th. Those of us who care about education would like to see us much higher still in the rankings, but the notion that we lag far behind the other states is bogus.

Where we do lag, often close to last place Mississippi, is student achievement.

- Our fourth and eighth graders score dead last in the country's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) science test along with Mississippi, reflecting both the highest percentage "below basic" and the lowest percentage "proficient."
- In 2001, 45% of entering California State University students required remedial mathematics.
- None of the high school grades averaged 50% correct answers on California's Standards Test for history, a multiple choice exam.

It's time for the truth about how much money we've been spending on our K-12 schools. And it's well past time for meaningful reform of our public schools.

Alan Bonsteel is president, and Peter Hanley executive director, of California Parents for Educational Choice. For more information, log on to www.cpeconline.org.

SOURCES

Given the amount of misinformation in circulation about California's per student spending, we would not be surprised to see some skepticism about our numbers. Therefore, we would like to point out the following sources of accurate information.

1. The information on the dramatic runup in California K-12 per student spending since 1978's Prop. 13 can be confirmed by a graph in the current budget analysis by the State Legislative Analyst, and can be viewed at www.lao.ca.gov. At the upper right, click on "Popular LAO pages," then "2002-3 Budget Analysis." Click on "Education" at the left, then "Overview."
2. Our ranking compared to other states can be confirmed on the National Education Association website at www.nea.org/publiced/edstats/rankings. We also have a copy of the latest unpublished rankings and per student spending numbers from the National Center for Education Statistics, a division of the U.S. Department of Education, and we'd be happy to fax it to you.

3. Confirmation of the \$7058 Prop. 98 per student spending figure, as well as the \$9000 total K-12 California per student spending figure, can also be found on the State Legislative Analyst web site at www.lao.ca.gov. Follow the instructions as above to find the precise section.

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