

Editorial

"Reviving education As new students crowd the classrooms, bold measures are needed"

By

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Five years ago we published a guest editorial in many of California's daily newspapers warning that California's school-aged population would explode by one-third over the following 10 years. At the halfway point in that prediction, our K-12 population has zoomed 11 percent. The best informed predictions for the next five years are for an even more explosive 16 percent growth rate, which, with compounding, will result in almost 29 percent growth over the course of that decade.

The kids expected during the next five years are already in the pipeline. They are the "mini-babyboom" children of those who have postponed childbearing in the past, and they are the children of immigrant families, who are both arriving at an undiminished rate and establishing families much larger than those of Anglos.

The experience of Santa Ana Unified is typical of the state's rapid K-12 growth. Santa Ana Unified enrolled 48,407 students in 1993 and 56,071 students in 1998 - a 15.8 percent growth rate over those five years, substantially higher than the state's growth rate over the same period.

The tidal wave has meant evermore school children being taught in "temporary" trailers

and in converted libraries. Class size reduction is a challenge, with most schools now out of space and often being forced to squeeze two classes into a single classroom. Aside from the necessity to repair decrepit schools, we will need to open a new public school in California every day for many years to come.

Where will the money come from? When the Los Angeles Unified School District completes the new Belmont Learning Center - the first high school it has completed since 1971 - it will have cost \$50,000 per student, and possibly much more if they don't resolve their hazardous waste problems quickly. That is more expensive than what less dysfunctional school districts are spending. However, even if we were to take the average statewide cost of new school construction in California, to build new schools and pay operating costs for this tidal wave of new kids would increase K-12 school spending in California by roughly 25 percent in constant dollarconstant dollars over the next five years. If we increase per-student spending another thousand dollars to the national average, the bill would come to a 40 percent increase in K-12 school spending.

Had California voters approved Proposition 174 for school choice in 1993, millions of California families would now be enjoying higher-quality schools at half the cost to taxpayers of our decaying public schools. Tragically, the \$25 million that the self-serving school employees' unions spent to promote the lie that Prop. 174 would have cost more money defeated it, and any hope we had for better schools.

By contrast, our neighbor Arizona has moved confidently into the future. Arizona is schooling its own, even larger tidal wave of kids primarily in charter schools - public schools of choice. These charter schools cost only a little more than half the per student spending in Arizona's public schools -while offering far higher quality. During the past four years, essentially all of Arizona's new K-12 population growth has been schooled in charter schools, which now make up about 25 percent of their schools.

California strengthened its charter school law this year, most importantly by allowing dramatically higher numbers of charter schools to be established. However, new charter schools alone won't solve the problem. To rescue a school system in period of being drowned, we need to take even bolder steps.

Californians will get another chance to vote for real school choice that includes private schools on the 2000 ballot. That vote will be the most important one of that ballot, because it will ask voters to make a stark choice -between an old discredited school system that is offering more of the same, and a new, dynamic paradigm that will allow us to confidently face the challenges of the next millennium.

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