

Editorial:

HOW TO PAY TEACHERS WHAT THEY'RE WORTH

By Alan Bonsteel, M.D.
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Governor Davis recently announced his belief that California taxpayers would never be willing to pay enough in taxes to permit market-level salaries for our teachers. He went on to urge young people to think of teaching as a kind of domestic Peace Corps assignment? a public service they would perform as “ temps” for a few years before going on to their *real* careers.

Davis is wrong on two counts. Teaching is the most important job in our society, and should be a high-status, long-term profession. And we're *already* paying enough in taxes to give teachers \$60,000 per year salaries, or what experienced workers in California who have a college degree typically earn.

The reason teachers aren't getting paid what they deserve is that the public education establishment is spending more than 40% of our tax dollars on bureaucracy and overhead, much of it going to fat cat administrators pulling down six figure salaries. The four interlocking layers of dysfunctional bureaucracies at the federal, state, county, and local levels consume almost as much money as is ultimately spent in the classroom. That's also why California's public school teachers have to dig into their own pockets for classroom supplies, and why art and music programs and school libraries have been slashed.

California is currently spending \$7500 per year for each K-12 student. (The \$6313 figure currently being bandied about is the “ Proposition 98” number, which dramatically understates true per student spending by omitting federal spending on California public schools, lottery money, construction costs of schools, and interest on school bonds.) That \$7500 figure represents a 39% *increase* in constant dollars since Proposition 13 was passed in 1978. For a typical classroom of 30, it means \$225,000 per nine-month school year. For that kind of money, we could pay teachers \$60,000 per year and still have a generous \$165,000 per year per classroom for overhead, books, and supplies.

These numbers aren't just theoretical. California's charter schools? public schools of choice? receive only about 60% of the per student funding of traditional public schools. They nevertheless have been able to pay their teachers about \$2000 per year *more* than those in traditional public schools. What makes it possible for charter schools to do that is that they are self-governing, and run by parents and teachers at the local level. They have thus chucked overboard the colossal layers of bureaucracy that weigh down our traditional public schools and hold down salary scales for our teachers.

Imagine a system in which parents could take their educational tax dollars and seek out the best school for their children. They would naturally choose schools that paid high salaries to “ trophy” teachers. Traditional public school districts would be forced to downsize their bureaucracies *fast*, and put the money back in the classroom, or face the fate of the Tyrannosaurus Rex.

The benefits to teachers, however, wouldn't end with higher salaries. When families can freely choose a school, there is a sense of community, of belonging, of commitment that is never present in compulsory government-run schools. When children *want* to be in a school and *value* what it has to offer, there is a creativity, an excitement, a shared purpose that is astounding to behold.

And when a teacher can stand before a classroom of kids like that, and feel that energy and that connection, there is a magic that keeps them coming back year after year and gives them the fire in the belly that turns the teaching profession into the inspired calling and the lifelong career that it should be.

Gray Davis can offer teachers higher salaries without a penny in new taxes. And with the same stroke he can give our California lower and middle-income parents the dignity and freedom of choice that has always worked for wealthier families.

Governor Davis should take to heart the best interests of teachers, of parents, and of children, and support school choice.