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Peter Schrag: California school funding: Inadequate by any measure

By Peter Schrag - pschrag@sacbee.com

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The latest numbers from the Census throw yet more confusion into the great school funding debate. By one set of tables, California's school revenues are just below the national average, and put us at 25th among the states.

On another Census table – school funding in relation to personal income, a measure of taxpayer effort – California ranks 35th, below most Southern states as well as high-spending Northeastern states such as New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Massachusetts.

But maybe the most relevant computations, which show the real inequities among the states, put California near the bottom. Those calculations take into account not only regional differences in the cost of living and thus the cost of attracting good people, but also the relative challenges of different kinds of school populations: poor kids, English learners, minorities.

By those criteria, in the calculations of, among others, Goodwin Liu of Boalt Hall School of Law at Berkeley, California ranks 45th. Only Tennessee, Florida, Mississippi, Arizona and Utah fund their schools even less adequately than California does.

Liu, who's done some of the most impressive work on the adequacy of school funding, and on its lack, believes that the huge differences in current spending among the states – nearly \$15,000 per pupil in New York compared to \$8,500 in California and \$5,400 in Utah in the unadjusted Census figures – is "a problem that only the federal government can meaningfully address."

In a recent article in the Yale Law Journal, he argues that the clause in the 14th Amendment granting citizenship to all native-born Americans imposes such a responsibility on the federal government. In the post-Civil War years, after the amendment was adopted to grant citizenship to the former slaves, Congress, acting on the presumption that citizenship was meaningless without education, several times came close to creating a broad federal program in education.

Liu recognizes that money is hardly an all-purpose solution. The dismal performance – the corruption and waste in high-spending districts such as Washington, D.C. – are evidence enough.

At the same time, as he says (in a recent article in the New York University Law Review), "it is difficult to believe that our gaping interstate disparities in educational standards and

resources have little or no bearing on unequal opportunity and outcomes."

If you want proof of that, all you have to do is look at the behavior of parents who have a choice of districts or at the hundreds of thousands of dollars – sometimes millions – that parents raise voluntarily in affluent districts to provide additional resources for their already well-resourced schools.

Liu, state school board member and former California education secretary Alan Bersin and retired Stanford professor Michael Kirst have just issued a paper (www.law.berkeley.edu/centers/ewi/GBTfissuebriefFINAL.pdf) that, like other school funding reform proposals, would reduce top-down regulation and expand local authority.

But it would also fund according to student needs and the relative cost of living in different parts of the state. It doesn't claim to address all school funding questions. And like other adequacy proposals, it can only guess at the real cost of, say educating an English learner as against a native English speaker, much less the difference between educating an English learner already literate in some other language and one who can't read or write in any language.

But it does recognize that "state allocations to school districts often bear little relation to educational costs or student needs ... high-poverty districts receive only slightly more revenue per than low-poverty districts."

The same, they point out, is true with respect to different concentrations of English learners. Something similar happens within districts where schools with large numbers of poor and minority students – also generally the oldest and most run-down schools – tend to get the newest and lowest paid teachers. That could also be mitigated by student-weighted formulas.

Liu, Bersin and Kirst's reform plan would hold all districts harmless. It's premised on the assumption that given the prediction that school enrollment will stay flat or even decline slightly in the years to come, there will be more money per student.

Those additional funds would be allocated according to their cost and student needs formulas.

Like others, they also argue that now – when the state is running a deficit, and when no one is rushing to grab new funds, as interest groups do in good times – is the best time to do the planning and put in place a fiscal arrangement that's fair and efficient.

Even on that score, they're probably over-optimistic. Will affluent suburban districts accept funding formulas that allocate the lion's share of new funds to poor schools? Will the California Teachers Association accept differential working conditions and perhaps differential pay, and loosen its grip on the existing seniority-based pay scales and assignment priorities?

Still it's encouraging that the structural unfairness and inadequacy of school funding, both among states and within California, are getting attention beyond the usual clichés and blather. It's the will, not the way, that's missing.

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From the Los Angeles Times

STEVE LOPEZ

Ponying up for a public education

Steve Lopez

April 9, 2008

Twenty-five years ago, I had a child enter kindergarten.

And now here I go again.

Yes, I take full responsibility for my actions. I just never imagined, as a native of a state with a once-great reputation for the quality of its public schools, that I'd attend a meeting like the one I attended Monday night at Ivanhoe Elementary in Silver Lake. That's where my daughter will start school in September.

The auditorium was packed; the mood somber. About 200 parents had come to hear what everyone knew would be disturbing news. An anticipated \$180,000 budget shortfall might well cost three critically important Ivanhoe educators their positions at the school, though they might be transferred elsewhere.

The parents group at the school had summoned families to tell them the news. And to present an alternative: a public education that would no longer be free.

Get out your checkbooks, parents were told. All those wrapping-paper sales and pancake fundraisers wouldn't be enough. We could either pony up some hard cash, or see Ivanhoe's standing as one of L.A. Unified's best schools threatened.

"We shouldn't be here tonight," parent Perry Herman told the crowd. "Our nation chooses to bail out investment houses rather than insuring our children."

But here we were, with the Friends of Ivanhoe urging parents to pay whatever they could to cover the shortfall and save the jobs of math coach and academic advisor Lynda Rescia, technology coordinator Carlos Hernandez and literacy coach Mary Frances Smith-Reynolds.

"She knows the reading strengths and weaknesses of every child in this school," a parent named Nancy Berglass said of Smith-Reynolds, praise that was echoed by parents and teachers for both of the others.

A parent across the aisle from me wiped away tears. So did a teacher who had to interrupt her own tribute to Rescia, Hernandez and Smith-Reynolds.

The principal, Jumie Sugahara, told me she hadn't yet received final budget numbers from district headquarters and couldn't say for sure how bad the hit would be. But the parents group did some math and decided to start the fundraising drive now, assuming Ivanhoe and other high-performing schools would get bigger cuts than schools that have greater challenges.

Pay \$25, if that's all you can afford, Herman said. But he pointed up to a screen encouraging parents to dig a little deeper. Those three jobs can be saved, he said, if 80 parents contribute \$250 apiece, 75 contribute \$500, 50 fork over \$1,000, 20 give \$2,000 and six bust the bank with \$5,000 contributions.

Four other L.A. Unified schools have already gone this route, Herman said, citing Canyon, Wonderland Avenue, Carpenter Avenue and Mar Vista.

If anyone in the audience was shaken by the reality of public school finance in the coming year, Berglass said, they'd better brace themselves for what might follow.

"The cuts we are talking about are just the tip of the iceberg," Berglass said, explaining that LAUSD has to cut \$100 million districtwide this year, but may have to trim an additional \$350 million in the two years after that.

She urged parents to tap grandparents, their religious congregations and their trust funds.

For several reasons, I find this all rather extraordinary. I feel more than a little lucky to live in a good neighborhood with a great public school that parents are passionate about. At the same time, I can't help but think about the impact of budget cuts at schools where there's not a chance of parents raising anywhere near \$180,000.

At nearby Micheltorena Street School, where more than 90% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, the principal told me that of course she can't match that kind of parental support. She's hoping that given the greater needs of her students, she'll be spared harsh cuts. But like other principals, she doesn't yet know how bad the news will be.

And the cuts were initiated, as you know, by a man who has tried to pass himself off as the education governor -- a man who doesn't have to worry about the impact of budget cuts on his own children. They go to private school.

David Goldberg, an Ivanhoe parent and an official with the teachers union, stood up and told parents that in addition to opening their checkbooks and fighting for their school, they needed to participate "in a broader movement that rejects all cuts."

Goldberg said he was a student at Micheltorena in 1977, when voters approved Proposition 13, saving homeowners billions in the coming years but delivering one blow after another to funding for education and other public services.

If corporate property taxes were reassessed upon sale, as are homes, it would help fill the budget gap, Goldberg said. And if the governor hadn't scaled back the car registration fee, parents might not be forced to start paying for schools that have always been free.

Berglass suggested that parents take the rebates promised by President Bush and donate them to Ivanhoe. Not a bad idea, but when will we ever stop playing this shell game in which politicians

rise to power promising prosperity without pain, even as working folks and retirees pay through the nose?

After hearing how deeply parents and teachers care about Ivanhoe, I was all the more convinced to write a check and send my daughter there.

I was sitting with Jeff Kelly, who moved into a costly fixer-upper last year just to be in the Ivanhoe neighborhood so he could avoid the cost of private school. He said he'll pony up too, although on principle he's conflicted. And so will Rob Schnapf, who noted that if he pays \$1,000 a year for two his two children, it's a fraction of what he'd pay at private school.

Parent Brigid LaBonge said the take for the evening was \$30,000, with more expected soon in pledge envelopes parents picked up at the door.

Only \$150,000 to go.

This school year, anyway.

steve.lopez@latimes.com
