



Free Fall: Educational Opportunities in 2011

Executive Summary

For several years, UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, in partnership with UC/ACCORD, has produced an annual report on the learning conditions and educational outcomes across California public schools. In last year's report, we highlighted how the "great recession" created new challenges for California's already weakened educational infrastructure. Now, the challenges California faces are worse.

High unemployment and decreased public education spending have moved California into uncharted territory. How are public schools coping with falling public investment in education? Have cuts affected the quality and distribution of educational opportunities? How do new school conditions affect student engagement, learning, and progress to graduation and college enrollment?

The 2011 Educational Opportunity Report draws on information gathered from California high school principals to address these questions. We surveyed 277 high school principals—almost a quarter of California's high schools—about learning conditions in their schools. We also conducted follow-up interviews with a representative sample of 78 of these principals, to explore the effects of changing conditions on California's students. The surveys and interviews reveal that district finances, school size, student demographics, and economic circumstances in the surrounding community place severe demands on schools. The data also highlight high school principals' struggles to maintain educational goals with insufficient resources.

Core findings from our surveys and interviews include:

- California high schools are providing less time, attention, and quality programs. As a consequence, student engagement, achievement and progress to graduation and college are suffering.
- School reform has all but sputtered to a halt due to staff cutbacks and the elimination of time for professional development.
- Even as high schools across the state are impacted by declining budgets, inequality is growing across and within schools;
- California's high schools face growing demands from families experiencing economic crisis that point to the inter-relationship of California's education and social welfare budgets.

A growing body of research points to the potential benefits of extending learning time to closing achievement gaps through longer days, longer school years and summer programs. And yet, many principals have had to cut back. Nearly half (49 percent) have reduced their school year since 2008 and 65 percent have cut back or eliminated summer school.

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Principals are not purchasing or replacing critical instructional materials, and they are asking parents to chip in. Students at almost two-thirds of high schools (63 percent) have reduced access to calculators, measuring instruments and other mathematical tools.

Almost all (88 percent) principals reported that budget cuts have stalled reform and professional development. Fewer teachers are able to work together, access outside experts, or learn from experienced teachers. Speaking of the shrinking time allotted to collaboration, one San Bernardino County principal, said, “To really do the work, you can’t do it in 45 minutes a week. They’re not going to be able to work together to the same degree that they did before.”

The budget cuts have affected all California public schools—from urban to rural, big to small campuses—but the impact has not been equal. Some schools have been able to protect vital services by appealing to their communities. Schools with few students from low-income families raise \$20 for every \$1 raised by high-poverty schools.

High schools with few poor students have been more likely to charge families for services or materials that were previously provided free to all; for example, field trips, athletics, art and music supplies, and even books. When schools don’t have to use their core budget to cover such items, they can protect other valuable services. “We get nickel-and-dimed, and it is the poor schools that are suffering more because of this,” said a Los Angeles County principal about the differences between low- and high-poverty communities.

Many students are hard hit by hunger and housing instability. Unemployed and underemployed families are finding it harder to pay for college. Seventy-eight percent of principals surveyed blamed the economy for fewer graduating seniors moving on to four-year colleges and universities.

Over the last decade, high school reform has emerged as a central issue for state and federal policy and a great deal of attention has centered on the problem of high dropout rates. Equally important has been the press to expand access to college.

The high school principals whose experiences and voices are at the heart of this report understand the direct and immediate connection between the opportunities they can provide and whether or not their students move on a pathway toward graduation and college. To thrive in school, their students need more instructional time, more attention from teachers and counselors, more and newer materials, more engaging and rigorous curriculum, more social supports. Yet, budget cuts and the economic crisis have left their schools with less, often much less, of these critical conditions. Schools serving large numbers of low-income families have been hit hardest. Staff layoffs and the elimination of professional development have halted many improvement efforts. In the last three years, California’s high schools have fallen from advancing reform to just barely surviving.

The full report can be accessed online at:

www.edopp.org

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