



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

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"Sharing the Sacrifice," "Global Competitiveness," and Children

by UCLA IDEA

Gov. Jerry Brown's January budget proposal was tough on K-12 schools, but Brown was confident that California voters would extend temporary taxes in a special election this coming June. That extension, if passed, would have added \$9 billion to the state's coffers.

But there will be no special election this June, and that means voters won't get a chance to breathe life into the schools. Late last month, hopes for the election crashed when Brown's negotiations with Republican lawmakers broke down.

Without the June election, schools statewide are bracing for still another round of massive cuts and budget uncertainty as state officials attempt to close the \$26 billion gap. The Legislative Analyst's Office reported schools could lose an additional \$4.5 billion representing a fall of 20 percent since the 2007-08 school year. Even before this new spate of bad news, more than 100 California school districts, enrolling 30 percent of the state's K-12 students, stood on the brink of insolvency.

Details of how recent funding cuts have played out at school campuses across California are provided in IDEA's recently released Educational Opportunity Report. Many principals report shorter school years, larger classrooms, and imposing obstacles to reform and student achievement. Conditions described in the report will not improve. With added funding there was some hope that the decline might stabilize, but as of this moment school officials and teachers are preparing for the likely event that next year will be worse.

While some still envision a legislative agreement before July that would extend the temporary taxes, the possibilities for such bipartisan action seem remote. The governor has placed hopes for some education relief later in the year, possibly September. "Breakdowns do lead to breakthroughs. It's just a matter of patience and a certain degree of creativity," Brown said. In the meantime, schools will be firing teachers and cutting schedules well in advance of the school year.

As the governor renews his appeals on behalf of schools, he, lawmakers, and the public, would do well to scan the last several years of UCLA's Educational Opportunity Reports. These reports take education "numbers" (dollars, scores, averages, rankings, etc.) and put them in the contexts of communities, regions, classrooms, children and teachers. In particular, the "Ed Opp" reports show how, in times of general funding shortages, the greatest burdens fall upon the poorest and traditionally underserved students and communities.

Too often education's claim on public support is diluted by arguments that all public services must "share the sacrifice" and the debates are marked by lofty abstractions like "global competitiveness." Brown should bring the debate down to earth and focus Californians on what our children experience each day in schools, which communities are most impacted, and how each cut in school resources tangibly affects students' lifelong opportunities.