



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

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Education Goals: From Survival to Excellence and Equity

By UCLA IDEA

Supporters of California's public education are adjusting to a novel educational and emotional landscape: Proposition 30, and the public support that propelled its victory, has broken a long, dreary spell of crises and precipitous funding cuts. The state has a long way to go before it arrives at equitable, long-term, rational systems for school finance, but policymakers and education leaders are responding quickly with short-term, system-saving measures. Immediately following the election, officials from the California State University system announced that the \$249 tuition increase charged this fall would be refunded or credited to student accounts. This week, the University of California and California State University systems agreed, at the urging of Gov. Jerry Brown, to postpone discussions about new fee hike. And Los Angeles Unified, the state's largest school district, reinstated 10 teacher furlough days.

The Legislative Analyst's Office projects just a single-digit budget shortfall next year, and a surplus beginning in 2014. "California is now on the path for a fair and sustainable budget as long as we continue to exercise fiscal discipline and pay down debt," Brown said. A large part of this good news and positive future projection stems from Proposition 30.

Leading up to the election some people were concerned that Californians had gotten used to a "new normal" of underfinanced schools and under-supported students—had grown deaf to dire predictions of collapsing k-12, college and university systems. On the other hand, opinion surveys have consistently shown that Californians want excellent schools and colleges and are willing to pay more to get them. This year, voters took their concern and support to the polls. Along with passing Proposition 30, 14 parcel tax measures for k-12 schools passed. And a newly elected Democratic supermajority in the Legislature could be poised to lead the upswing of investment.

Do the election results signal a new era of school support? That might take months and years to determine. The annual \$6 billion raised by new taxes hits a pause button in the state's years-long education decline. But it does not launch California schools toward the national preeminence they once earned. "Now, at best, we're roughly back to some approximation of an inadequate norm." All the funds generated from Proposition 30 would not bring California per-pupil spending up to the national average, "much less to anything approaching real adequacy or equity in our diverse, convoluted system."

So it's best that we look at the new education money as necessary, but not sufficient—a beginning, not a victory. Policymakers still need to design a reliable funding system that lets schools plan and build on taxpayers' education investment year after year. And education policies must also distribute money based on what it actually costs to educate students, without limiting some students to clearly inadequate resources. In other words, we must insist that individual students and groups of students get the resources they need, rather than just state or district totals or averages. To that end, Brown has restarted discussions on a weighted student funding formula, which would distribute additional funds for high-need students without negatively impacting well-resourced students and schools.