



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week: Aug. 30-Sept. 3, 2010

Back-to-School Blues (and some reasons for hope)

By UCLA IDEA

The beginning of each school year signifies a fresh start—new hopes and resolutions, a new grade level, a new teacher, new supplies and clothes; and yes, learning new stuff: the satisfaction of mathematics, stories from literature and history, wonders of science, and all the rest. Those of us who are years removed from back-to-school moments can still recall both the excitement and apprehension of reentering school halls and classrooms.

Regular readers of these *UCLA IDEA Themes* might feel more apprehension than most. Much of last year's education policy news and analysis has been very grim, indeed. What changes can families expect to see at school as a result of a year's worth of hits to the state's public education system? And what makes us feel good about California schools?

First, the bad news:

Crowded Classrooms Thousands of layoffs mean teachers will instruct more students. The California Board of Education, which grants requests to increase class sizes in grades with caps to enrollment, gave out 16 exemptions in the past year, but has heard 16 requests last month and expects to hear another 16 this month ([Sacramento Bee](#)). Class size increases usually occur in increments of one or two students per year, so the news of an increase doesn't strike most people as terribly significant—what's another student or two in a class if it means that a school district can remain solvent? Yet, it doesn't take many years before California teachers are teaching [44 students in a foreign language class or 39 students in science](#). A [\\$10 billion federal bill could provide relief](#), but it's uncertain how much or when that money will get to schools.

Shorter School Years Some school districts have cut costs with furloughs achieved by eliminating days from the school year. Districts try to restrict furloughs to non-instructional days, but many can't limit them in that way. Besides, those "non-instruction" days will be sorely missed. These are days that have been used for training, planning, parent conferencing, and other essential activities that schools and teachers will have to pinch from instructional time or drop altogether. California's calendar has gone down from 180 days to 175 for many students ([California Watch](#), [Orange Counter Register](#)).

Bare Bones Classrooms The remaining teachers must make do with less. If they're not asking students and parents to supply classroom materials or dipping into their own pockets, they're [cutting erasers in half](#) to stretch them out or [reaching out to private donors](#). Schools will continue to see declines in maintenance, technology purchases and repairs, availability of books and paper, and more.

Diminished Programs Summer school continues to be threatened with many programs cuts. Nationwide, [programs of all sorts were diminished](#), including [cutting lunches to low-income students](#). Some programs that provide instruction to juvenile offenders, expelled students, pregnant teens and others who benefit

from alternatives to traditional public high schools could be cut or eliminated ([Los Angeles Times](#)). As districts [cut back on transportation services](#), families scramble to find reliable and safe ways to get to school. The cuts will be more than just inconvenient. Many students and parents will face added stress, wasted time, and even lost days of work and school.

Lack of School Staff Support Gone are the days of school nurses. Fewer and fewer of them are assigned to one campus anymore. If they have not been laid off, the remaining district nurses are now finding themselves rotating among many different campuses ([Sacramento Bee](#)). Guidance counselors, social workers, college and career counselors, and librarians are suffering the same fate.

Uncertainty Schools are realistic, “make-do” institutions. If funding, last-minute program changes, reforms, or teacher hiring (and student assignments and scheduling) are unclear by the first day of school, principals don’t have the luxury of saying they’re not ready—that they will push back schools’ first day to November 1. These distracting conditions can turn schools into frantic environments—a condition that wastes time and saps attention to teaching and learning.

So, What’s the Good News?

Teachers and Other School Personnel The vast majority of California teachers are dedicated, caring and skilled. This is easily overlooked in the midst of sensational demands that schools root out teachers who are slackers and incompetents. Most parents say that their own local schools and teachers do a pretty good job ([PPIC](#)). Teachers can’t overcome the inadequacies of underfunded and under-resourced schools, but they keep learning alive in classrooms.

Students California students are rich in their diversity and potential. When given appropriate opportunities to learn and the help of caring adults, they work hard and achieve well.

Parents and Communities California has an abundance of neighborhood and community groups that work tirelessly to bring opportunities to students. Some have joined with civil rights organizations, [calling on the state to fulfill its constitutional obligations](#) to provide all students a quality education. Others support new programs and schools which are models for what communities want for all of their children. New coalitions of grassroots groups and long-established civic groups are summoning their values and commitments to public education and their political clout to reestablish education as a top civic priority.