



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

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"Do As I Say, Not As I Vote"

By UCLA IDEA

Californians went to the polls this week and for the third time in 36 years elected Democrat Jerry Brown as governor. Much has changed for California schools since the 1970s when Brown followed Ronald Reagan to lead the state. At that time, California schools were considered among the best in the nation. But that was before the full impact of Prop. 13 set in to limit property taxes, which were an important source of school funding.

This time around, Governor-elect Brown won't have the cushion of a robust and envied school system. Since Brown was last governor, California's school funding has fallen precipitously relative to the rest of the nation. This year, California's average per pupil expenditure lags further behind the national average than ever before. The effects of this funding decline are clear: California students now are packed into larger classrooms and have less access to academic counselors than students in any other state.

Further, California's 2010 electorate rejected measures that might have made it easier to generate funds for schools. Prop. 24, which would have repealed \$1.3 billion in corporate tax breaks, was defeated. Prop. 26, requiring a two-thirds vote to levy fees, passed. In a hopeful sign for schools, Prop. 25 won, so a simple majority of legislators will be able to pass the state budget instead of the two-thirds vote previously required. It remains to be seen if this new budget threshold helps schools.

Californians are sending a mixed message considering recent survey data on their views about schools. Earlier this year, the Public Policy Institute of California found that the majority of those polled said the state doesn't spend enough on education. Three in four said education reform should be a top priority for the next governor.

Yet, on election night Jerry Brown was clear in his interpretation of the electorate's attitudes: "The taxpayers gave and they took away... This tells me they're not in the mood to dig deep into their pockets." For Brown, the key questions now are: "What does California need, what does California want and what is California prepared to pay?"

While it will be difficult for Sacramento to generate new revenue for California's schools, the prospects for new funds from Washington D.C. are even dimmer. The new Republican majority in the House of Representatives will press to reduce spending, curtail stimulus funds, and pull back the federal involvement in schools.

So, barring a significant grassroots mobilization that might change the political calculus, the outlook for school reform remains bleak at the dawn of Brown's third administration. With the continuing drumbeat for school improvement, innovation and reform, politicians, including Brown, will be searching for low-cost incentives and sanctions to squeeze higher performance out of schools. Schools will do their best, but they will remain buffeted by contradictions between what Americans say they want for schools and what they vote to provide them.