



Week of May 9-13, 2011

What Don't Legislators Understand about 'Emergency'?

By UCLA IDEA

The California Teachers Association, the state's largest teacher union, has declared a state of emergency. Is that exaggeration? Hyperbole? Or an accurate depiction of a critical threat? Arguably, as many children will be affected by this emergency as by more newsworthy tornados, floods, fires, or earthquakes. There will be fewer deaths and less dramatic video, but this education emergency is no less destructive.

Teachers have called on Californians to rally in Sacramento to protest the three-year devastation of public education and to press legislators to support a tax extension. Some of the crowd carried signs aimed at those legislators: "Do your job, so we can do ours."

Teachers handed out leaflets. Some were arrested at a sit-in at the Capitol. They set up 400 empty chairs on the Capitol lawn. Each chair represented 100 teachers, counselors, nurses, librarians and support staff—or 40,000 employees—laid off since the recession began. About 19,000 pink slips have been issued pending a May 15 deadline.

The latest *Educational Opportunity Report* from UCLA's Institute for Democracy Education and Access (IDEA) detailed the extent of budget cuts and the impact on high school students and programs. Upon taking office earlier this year, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson also declared a state of emergency. This week, Torlakson said, "Those chairs just don't represent 100 teachers. They represent 100 dynamic forces in a child's life." The state PTA delivered more than 1,000 cards to legislators and another group, Parents for Great Education, developed an internet search tool detailing how much money and how many teachers individual districts stand to lose.

Students traveled to Sacramento. They know the consequences of the cuts and are deeply worried. "When I meet with my elected representatives today, I want to look them in the eye and tell them they need to invest in my future, the future of my classmates, and the future of students across California. We're worth it," said Miriam Hernandez, a junior from the Fresno area and member of Californians for Justice.

Students in Union City, where a parcel tax was defeated by 32 votes last week, walked out of school in protest. "A lot of people had problems about the school not getting a lot of money because we're not in class, but it doesn't matter anymore, because we're not getting money at all," said student Ly Ho.

The Sacramento protest events will wrap up today and it seems doubtful that they'll have much immediate effect. Gov. Brown spared K-12 education in his January budget proposal, but only on the condition that voters extend taxes set to expire this summer. Without Republican support the

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extension didn't make it onto the June ballot. Unless the Legislature changes course and agrees to raise taxes, the best remaining hope is November's election. But by then, the new school year will have started, thousands of teachers will have been laid off, and school programs will have been further diminished by local school boards trying to balance their budgets.

As we have seen this week, there's great support for rescuing California schools and for extending current taxes. But Brown's May budget revision likely won't reflect that support, and schools could face an additional \$4 billion in cuts. So is there an emergency? As a manner of speaking, "emergency" usually refers to *unexpected* events. This emergency is neither sudden nor surprising, just ignored. We saw it coming; we were here when it arrived; and we watched it get worse.

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