



# THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA'S weekly commentary on education news

*Week of Sept. 6-9, 2011*

## **Back to School, Now Back to Work**

By UCLA IDEA

As more than 6 million California students start a new school year, an untold number of them will have parents who are jobless. More than 2 million Californians are out of work after 29 straight months of unemployment rates in the Golden State at their highest since the Great Depression. This figure could be as relevant to student achievement and opportunity as more strictly education issues in the news—charter schools, testing, teacher qualifications and so forth.

When parents lose jobs, more children arrive at school homeless, hungry and stressed. These children may be further affected by loss of parent-paid extra-curricular activities, tutoring or they may move around often as parents seek temporary work where they can find it.

Of no less consequence is the connection between joblessness and children's in-school experiences. Laid-off teachers, counselors and other school staff mean larger classrooms, less attention, reduced or eliminated after-school programs and other support services for students and schools. Thus, unemployment doesn't affect just those children whose parents can't find a job; it hurts everyone at the community's schools.

The unemployed not only call upon social services that may compete with schools for scarce public funds (healthcare, food support, etc), but they also put less money back into the tax system, further diminishing school budgets. A National Bureau of Economic Research study recently reported that students in high-unemployment communities experienced lower academic achievement, even when their own parents were unaffected.

When families come upon hard times, schools should be safe, stable and nurturing havens where adults help students learn by mitigating out-of-school disruptions. It's encouraging to see state education leaders push for job-creating policies generally, and education support in particular. Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson sent President Barack Obama a letter Tuesday calling for support to save education jobs and invest in school infrastructure.

"The fiscal crisis facing California has led to the loss of tens of thousands of teaching and school employee jobs, despite the significant help your Administration provided," he wrote, referring to \$7.5 billion in stimulus funds for k-12 education.

Obama unveiled a \$447 billion jobs package Thursday night with substantial emphasis to education, jobs and job training. The American Jobs Act would create construction jobs to renovate 35,000 public schools. It also directs money to cash-strapped states to protect education jobs. Obama urged Congress to act "right away" and indicated that the effects on job growth and saved teacher jobs would begin immediately. "Pass this jobs bill," he said, "and thousands of teachers in every state will be back to work."

####

For links to news articles, read our *Themes in the News* online.

[www.ucla-idea.org](http://www.ucla-idea.org)