

“The Wealthiest Sliver”

Some California schools have very fine facilities and learning resources. Consider the high schools with 12 students in a class; experienced teachers with Ph.D.s teaching advanced placement and honors classes; fully stocked libraries; cutting-edge technology in science laboratories; access to drama, dance, chorus, band, ceramics, sculpture and other visual arts; maintained, safe campuses with open green spaces.

That education costs more than \$30,000 a year at one of the state’s premier private schools. These schools serve many families in the top 1 percent of family income in the state—families with incomes of more than 300,000¹. According to the California Budget Project, “the incomes of the wealthiest sliver of the population skyrocketed to such an extent over the past two decades that even the worst recession in the post-World War II era failed to fully erase their gains.”

We don’t guarantee that the education at these elite private schools is *better*, but odds are that it is. Today, as we read about the various “occupy” movements across the nation, we are mindful that the 1 percent—99 percent division of wealth that is at the heart of the protests is mirrored in California’s schools (Washington Postⁱⁱ, New York Timesⁱⁱⁱ, Los Angeles Times^{iv}, Amanda Ripley^v).

Over the last three years, California has made deep cuts to the amount it spends on the education of the 99 percent. Our Per-pupil spending is now 47th in the nation, lagging behind the national average by more than \$2,000. The state’s student-teacher ratio is 49th in the nation. California is dead last in librarians and guidance counselors per student.^{vi}

Analysts are not optimistic that schools can avoid further cuts (Business Week^{vii}). California’s most recent budget includes automatic reductions to public education if state revenues don’t meet projections. If that’s the case, public schools could soon lose up to \$2 billion more. Districts that gambled on economic recovery could be in deepest trouble. San Diego Unified, the state’s second-largest district, resisted laying off teachers and now faces insolvency (Voice of San Diego^{viii}).

Recent research from Stanford University’s Sean Reardon^{ix} found growing educational inequality between the affluent and other Americans. The achievement gap between students from the wealthiest and the poorest families grew by roughly 50 percent between the mid 1970s and 2001. During this period, the educational achievement gap also grew between children from the wealthiest families and children from the middle class. Reardon notes that families with means can invest in their children’s education through tutors, enrichment and private schools. Further, they increasingly live in neighborhoods with other affluent residents where their local taxes, influence and personal wealth make it possible for their own children to be well-served in public schools.

Few protesters in the public squares are asking for a radical redistribution of the nation’s wealth. Their moderate “victory” would include a return to the tax rates in place during most of the 20th century, reasonable regulations of key economic sectors, and the elimination of key tax loopholes. That alone could help public school students regain a measure of what they have lost in the last few years. As for those billionaires who have

¹ http://www.cbp.org/pdfs/2011/110903_On_The_Edge.pdf

decided to be actively involved in education reform, we'd ask them to have similarly modest goals. Instead of radically redesigning public education to replicate the competition, inequalities, and cycles of the marketplace, they might attend to funding that allows the basics of class size, experienced and well-trained teachers, and the materials and facilities that all students need to learn (Huffington Post^x, Rethinking Schools^{xi}).

ⁱ http://www.cbp.org/pdfs/2011/110903_On_The_Edge.pdf

ⁱⁱ http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/education-activists-seek-to-collaborate-with-occupy-wall-street/2011/10/15/gIQAbrDZmL_blog.html

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/20/opinion/occupy-the-classroom.html?_r=1

^{iv} <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2011/10/occupy-movement-rallies-at-school-district-headquarters.html>

^v

http://www.amandaripley.com/blog/is_occupy_wall_street_really_about_education_reform/#When:11:00:51Z

^{vi} <http://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/newsroom/idea-news/sept.-30-cper-powerpoint-presentation>

^{vii} <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2011-10-11/california-tax-revenue-decline-inches-state-toward-trigger-cuts.html>

^{viii} http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/public_safety/pavement/article_44cee27e-fa09-11e0-bdf8-001cc4c002e0.html

^{ix} <http://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/reardon%20whither%20opportunity%20-%20chapter%205.pdf>

^x http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rick-ayers-/occupy-our-schools_b_1019878.html

^{xi} <http://rethinkingschoolsblog.wordpress.com/2011/10/18/corporate-school-reform-and-10-hopeful-signs-of-resistance/>