

Election Initiatives and Voter Responsibilities

After years of budget cuts, various California groups are turning to the initiative process to raise funds for public schools and other vital state services. In the last two weeks, advocates have floated several possible initiatives that could go before voters in November 2012. It's likely that even more ideas will emerge before the end of the year when draft measures must be submitted to the Attorney General (New York Timesⁱ).

In the first few months of 2012, advocates will ask Californians to sign petitions to qualify their measure for the ballot. Everyone will claim they want *what's best for the kids*. And voters will try to separate broad, lofty claims from the tangible effects of the various positions. Many voters will rely on quick readings of the petitions; some will decide on just a few words from the signature gatherers; others will take the advice of friends, organizations or media they trust. Still others will ask tough questions about the initiatives. For these voters, we offer some questions that we think are important:

Regarding **process**:

- Who participated in crafting the initiative?
- Who is funding the initiative and what are their interests?
- Who are the opponents and what are their interests?
- Is this an idea that can be easily understood by the public?

Regarding **revenue**:

- Is the burden distributed in a fair manner?
- Does the new revenue scheme ameliorate or worsen income inequality?
- Does it create greater stability in California's revenue stream?

Regarding the **distribution** of funds:

- Does it generate enough money to address the programs that have been lost? Meet the national average in terms of per-pupil spending? Reach adequacy levels?
- Does the money go to areas of greatest need?

Regarding **consequences**:

- What are its unintended consequences?
- Does it provide a false sense that the funding problem has been fixed?
- Does it limit future flexibility for legislators or school board members?

Here are brief summaries of initiatives currently with some momentum:

*Our Children, Our Future: Local Schools and Early Education Investment Act*ⁱⁱ—This initiative is promoted by the Advancement Project and endorsed by the California State PTA. Filed with the Attorney General on Wednesday, this initiative would raise \$10 billion from an income tax increase that ranges from less than 1% for low-income families to more than 2% for the highest income-earners. Of the \$10 billion, \$1.5 billion would be used to expand early childhood and preschool programs. The remainder would be directed to k-12 students generally, with targeted support for low-income students (Thoughts on Public Educationⁱⁱⁱ).

Think Long Committee for California^{iv} also has a \$10 billion initiative in the works. Money would be raised by creating a new tax on services (such as legal or accounting fees), while lowering personal income and corporate tax rates. It would also eliminate Prop 98, which guarantees minimum funding for California schools. Public schools and community colleges would receive \$5 billion. Another \$2.5 billion would be directed to the University of California and California State University systems, with the remainder going to counties and cities for other expenditures. The Think Long Committee hinted that revenues would be paired with a “reform” package addressing issues ranging from teacher seniority to digital learning to data transparency (Thoughts on Public Education^v, Sacramento Bee^{vi}, California Progress Report^{vii}).

Gov. Jerry Brown is also expected to unveil a \$7 billion initiative. With support of labor leaders, Brown’s plan calls for half-cent sales tax increase, along with an additional income tax of 1% on individual income above \$250,000, 1.5% for those between \$300,000 and \$500,000, and 2% for those making more than \$500,000. It’s unclear how much of the new revenue would go toward k-12 education (Los Angeles Times^{viii}).

Yet another proposal may be forthcoming from Children Now^{ix}, which this week released results from a poll that found public support for a tax increase committed to funding education, but with caveats. Support rose to two-thirds if the funding was tied to education reforms, like more local control of finances and teacher evaluations and dismissals. “The reform piece is needed to bring folks together. It provides a clear path for voters,” said Children Now President Ted Lempert (Thoughts on Public Education^x).

It’s important to keep in mind that this glut of proposals reflects a broad sentiment in the state: voters want to “take the initiative” and secure needed funds for California schools. However, along with *initiative* comes *responsibility* for becoming informed. The questions listed above (and surely others) need to be explored by the media and in public conversations to ensure California gets *what’s best for the kids*.

ⁱ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/01/us/in-california-a-push-for-tax-increases-on-the-2012-ballot.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.ourchildrenourfuture2012.com/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://toped.svefoundation.org/2011/11/28/new-initiative-10b-for-k-12-preschools/>

^{iv} <http://berggruen.org/thinklongcommittee>

^v <http://toped.svefoundation.org/2011/11/28/new-initiative-10b-for-k-12-preschools/>

^{vi} <http://blogs.sacbee.com/capitolalertlatest/2011/11/california-teachers-association-rejects-tax-overhaul-plan.html#ixzz1eTFEkB9u>

^{vii} <http://www.californiaprogressreport.com/site/think-long-attacks-public-education>

^{viii} <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/california-politics/2011/11/brown-tax-plan.html>

^{ix} www.childrennow.org

^x <http://toped.svefoundation.org/2011/11/30/poll-dedicated-tax-with-ed-reforms-is-winner/>