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School Funding and the Price of Flexibility

By UCLA IDEA

Responding to widespread protests, the Los Angeles Unified School District will not cut, or at least will postpone cuts, of over \$550 million from the 2012-13 school year budget, as had been planned. Hundreds packed the LAUSD boardroom and more protested outside, prompting street closures. They came to plead for adult education, early education, after-school programs, arts in elementary school and other categorical programs—all of which were earmarked for elimination. The board postponed the vote until March, giving time for Superintendent John Deasy to negotiate concessions with labor unions, and for the public to pressure legislators for more funding.

According to EdSource, a reliable source of information on complex education issues, “categorical funds represent a sizable part of the budget for most school districts and can have a major effect on local expenditure decisions. However, in response to the recent state budget crisis, California lawmakers are allowing districts more flexibility in how they spend those funds.”

Indeed, districts are taking advantage of loosened guarantees—sometimes drastically reducing or eliminating programs—often, in order to pay schools’ utility bills and meet payrolls. It’s a wrenching task. “We can’t live with eliminations,” said Los Angeles board Member Steve Zimmer, but “there will be cuts.”

By stepping back from its decision on cuts, the board’s action is reminiscent of Gov. Jerry Brown’s attempt to eliminate school bus funds earlier this year. After much political pressure and campaigning from rural and poor districts, Brown reversed course and will keep the busses rolling through next year.

Some additional flexibility might allow local districts to decide how best to use their limited resources. However, categorical funds, historically, have been instituted for sound reasons: “to remedy inequities among students; to ensure that all students are served, especially the hardest to educate; and to support current priorities, particularly when there are extra funds.”

Meanwhile, the Senate is considering Brown’s new school funding plan which would create a weighted formula, giving school districts a base amount per student and up to \$3,000 more for those with the greatest need, such as English language learners and low-income students. This plan would also phase out the majority of categorical programs. Such a new, more rational system of school funding, based on weighted formulas, stands a chance of allowing greater local flexibility while preserving important protections and guarantees now protected by categorical funding.

But we can’t forget that the reasons behind categorical funding remain. Without “strings-attached” money, many local districts could decide, as they have done in the past, not to provide crucial services. Can California lawmakers fashion a school finance system that provides both flexibility and essential guarantees? In principle, Brown’s “weighted formula” is a good start. However, flexibility without wisdom, fairness, guarantees, and money leads only to more dreadful choices of how to reorganize hardships among the most vulnerable, at-risk students.

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