



Week of June 4-8, 2012

Next, Take Science and Divide by Two

by UCLA IDEA

More than a decade ago, school policy and reform trends merged around a narrow view of what education California students were entitled to receive. For example, a growing concern about gaps in test performance among different groups of students (typically, racial, economic, and linguistic) led to concentrating instruction in those tested areas—namely, English language arts and mathematics. In the last few years, diminished school budgets have caused schools to focus their scarce resources on subjects that would show up on school-accountability report cards. Over the years, reading and math have become essential, while the rest of the curriculum disposable.

The arts, social studies, and now even science are not only in decline, but in many cases absent; and there are consequences. "The arts are a solution right in front of us for all kinds of issues. Issues of building empathy in children, critical thinking, building creativity of course, building community, collaborative skills, thinking outside the box," said Robin Lithgow, Los Angeles Unified's elementary art coordinator.

Gov. Jerry Brown's May Revise budget proposed reducing the state's requirements for graduation from two years of science to one. The state is obligated to pay districts \$250 million a year for the cost of a second-year science course, but that mandate hasn't been paid since 2005. The governor's recommendation tries to stop accruing debt it cannot pay, but critics worry that some cash-strapped districts, particularly those serving poorer students, will curtail their science education.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson cautioned, "It's a huge contradiction that a state that produced such marvels to the world in technology is not investing enough in science to prepare students to fill the jobs of the future."

A result of the state backing off from its funding obligations is that local communities must try to pick up the slack. On Tuesday, a number of districts passed parcel taxes to fill holes in gutted curricula. These taxes are among the least equitable ways to fund public education (a point we have addressed here before). There are, unfortunately, few options other than this piecemeal, district-by-district approach. Los Angeles Unified had planned to seek a \$298 parcel tax on the November ballot but decided against it.

Of the 13 school parcel taxes on the June 5 ballot that were designed to support manageable class sizes, quality programs and arts education, nine met the two-thirds threshold needed to pass. Even the failed measures received a majority of the vote, including two losing Santa Barbara County measures—to protect music and performing arts— that nevertheless received more than 64-percent support.

In Santa Cruz, the community supported extending two parcel taxes for its elementary and secondary schools. The funds will go toward counseling and to protect school art and music instruction. "The

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community stepping up to fill in things that really are a part of a comprehensive liberal arts education is something we are very thankful for," said Santa Cruz City Schools board President Ken Wagman.

California struggles on with its hit-or-miss education funding—with mostly misses than hits. The system is inadequate, inequitable and inefficient. The recent elections show that Californians want their schools to be sensibly funded, but state leaders have yet to come up with a rational, reliable and fair way to accomplish that support.

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