



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Aug. 13-17, 2012

How Good News Happened

by UCLA IDEA

This week, University of California, Berkeley researchers reported that a \$19.5 billion building project in Los Angeles Unified yielded significant academic gains at elementary schools, particularly for students who transferred from severely overcrowded campuses.

New Schools, Overcrowding Relief, and Achievement Gains in Los Angeles - Strong Returns from a \$19.5 Billion Investment analyzed the effects of Los Angeles' ambitious building plan—131 new schools—funded by voter-approved local and state bonds. This building program provided new facilities to thousands of students and reduced overcrowding in existing schools. On average, elementary school students who moved to new schools made gains that were equal to up to 35 instructional days. For students who were relieved of extreme overcrowding situations, the gains were 65 days. Students who remained in the previously overcrowded schools also experienced modest gains..

"It may be that the new-school effect stems from the fact that we had young kids packed like sardines in the classrooms, and overnight they moved to clean and tidy facilities staffed by younger, better-trained teachers," said Bruce Fuller, one of the authors.

Indeed in the 1990s, schools across California, and particularly in Los Angeles, had reached unprecedented levels of overcrowding, often with conditions more often associated with slum housing. More than one-third of California students had class in a *portable* or *trailer*. What were once gyms, computer labs and libraries became classrooms. Schools developed multi-track years to accommodate the influx. In Los Angeles, 25,000 students were bused to other schools. Some spent more than two hours commuting.

These were some of the appalling conditions that led to *Williams v. California*, the path-breaking class-action lawsuit that alleged the state failed to provide millions of California students, primarily low income students and students of color, the bare essentials of an education, including safe and secure facilities. The suit also challenged a version of year-round education ("Concept 6") that provided less instructional time to many of the same students. State officials initially dismissed these claims as unrelated to school quality. They denied that these conditions affected the ability of students to learn and teachers to teach.

But a broad, statewide coalition of community groups, advocacy groups and civil rights lawyers continued to draw attention to the problems of overcrowded classrooms, substandard facilities, and an unequal instructional time for students in Los Angeles. That effort led to the 2004 *Williams* settlement, which set aside \$800 million for facility repairs, and a deadline for ending "Concept 6" schedules that could only be met through a massive school construction effort.

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Responding to an advocacy campaign supported by many of the same groups and with expert assistance from the Advancement Project, voters in Los Angeles and statewide supported several ballot initiatives to fund new school facilities. The nearly \$20 billion Los Angeles effort examined by PACE is the second-largest public works project in the nation.

The UC Berkeley study reports on the impact of new construction on student test scores, but the new school buildings have had a broader effect as well. By creating new and improved conditions for teaching and learning, the new schools promote teacher morale and dramatically decrease teacher turnover. Harder to capture in numbers is the sense of pride students and parents feel in seeing state of the art public institutions in their own communities. These positive civic lessons are a powerful legacy of public investment and the broad-based civic activism that led to it.

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