



# THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

*Week of Sept. 17-21, 2012*

## **Broke is Broke**

by UCLA IDEA

A Google search for the expression “broke is broke” turns up 31,000 hits. Broadly speaking, and without presuming a fair item analysis, that phrase describes many California schools. Set aside the analyses, ideology, flow charts, blame and disquisitions on the economy—some school districts are just plain out of money. What don't Californians understand about “broke”?

Earlier this year, the California Department of Education warned that one in three public school students—roughly 2 million—goes to school in a financially strapped district. It would only be a matter of time before the districts could not meet their financial obligations—pay their bills and salaries—or educate their students.

That time has arrived for Inglewood Unified School District. On Friday, Gov. Jerry Brown signed a bill to loan the nearly bankrupt district \$55 million and install a state-appointed administrator to handle all future decision-making. Inglewood Unified has become the ninth district in California's history to lose its local autonomy. The five-member elected board will now serve in an advisory capacity.

State Sen. Roderick Wright, D-Inglewood, said of this turn of events: "This loan will close a painful chapter in the Inglewood Unified School District's recent history and allow staff to get back to the business of educating the next generation of community leaders."

Wright drafted the bill after Inglewood's attempts to balance its budget included layoffs, furloughs and, most recently, two days before the bill was signed, a 15-percent pay cut for employees, which the unions are fighting in court.

A mix of revenue shortfalls, fiscal mismanagement and broad public awareness of deficient learning opportunities in Inglewood Unified have pushed the district to this point. When parents could find or afford alternatives to their children attending district schools, they grabbed those chances. Many turned to charter schools that have opened in recent years, leaving the local neighborhood schools with less state funding for remaining students. While it may be possible for a district system to adjust to falling enrollment over a period of years, in the short run, reduced revenue cannot cover costs fixed by ongoing salary agreements and service contracts.

Charters still only serve a minority of Inglewood's students, but they now enroll enough students to tip the fiscal balance, and that helps to put the public system in jeopardy. Declining enrollment is not new to the 12,000-student district. "The district has struggled for years and people didn't talk about it," said Inglewood community member Kokayi Jitahidi. "Now we have to start from the ground up, come together—even with the limited resources—and rebuild a district that can actually be sustainable and successful."

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Districts everywhere, but especially in urban neighborhoods with large populations of students of color and low-income families, are faced with the pressure of losing students to charter expansion. Charters are publically funded schools, but they often have budget options that are not available to schools in the public system. For example, it is well documented that some charters discourage enrollment of high-cost students, like those in special education, and they may have greater access to revenue sources from non-profit foundations.

Charters are not responsible for school district insolvency—they are neither the cause of nor the solution to a much greater school-funding mess. It's likely that by decently funding public schools, charters would not have quite the same appeal as an escape route from the public system, and the experimentation and innovation originally envisioned as the purpose for charters would be more widespread. That is, a better-resourced and more vibrant public system would free up charters to be a more powerful force for creativity and improvement.

Public schools need adequate, predictable, fair and rational public funding for the long term. And they need passage of the November tax initiative for the short term. Californians can engage themselves with discussions of privatization, charterization, de-unionization and value-added accountability, but their first job is to pay the bills for public education.

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