



THEMES in the NEWS

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The Education Battle that All Sides Could Lose

by UCLA IDEA

Education campaigns can get nasty. Candidates and advocates routinely invoke fears of economic and social collapse. Then the overwrought rhetoric subsides, schools and colleges still function (more or less), and life goes on as it normally does. In California, each new round of desperate pleas and predictions can start sounding familiar instead of fearful.

So, will California's current competing campaigns for education funding—Propositions 30 and 38—raise an additional \$6 billion to \$10 billion; or will the rhetoric dampen the public's enthusiasm for either one? Polling suggests that a strong majority of Californians favor raising taxes to provide more money to public schools; yet, even before the initiatives were filed, many were concerned that the appearance of competition between Propositions 30 and 38 would create confusion or, worse, ill will that would cause both initiatives to fail. (The California Budget Project and EdSource have recently provided voters with handy information to facilitate side-by-side comparisons of the two measures—should both initiatives pass, the one with more votes will take effect.)

The past decades of doomsday narratives have not been false cries of alarm. Those dire predictions have become the status quo. And yes, things can get worse. The state consistently ranks near the bottom of per-pupil spending and new analysis by UCLA IDEA of data from the National Center for Educational Statistics places California absolutely last in ratios of teachers, counselors and librarians to students.

- California teachers have **50 percent more** students than teachers across the nation.
- California counselors have **twice** as many students as the national average.
- California school librarians work with **more than eight times** the number of students as the rest of the nation.

So are voters inured to bad education news? Or can they take seriously the threat of automatic cuts of \$5.4 billion for community colleges and public K-12 schools, which could include shortening the *current* school year by three weeks? These will be the consequences if Gov. Brown's Proposition 30 loses on November 6. That scenario also would bring \$250 million in cuts to the California State University *and* the University of California, leading to steep tuition hikes, enrollment cutbacks, or both.

In the last weeks before the election, as well-funded campaigns pit one side against another, we mustn't lose sight of a powerful third "side" in this education battle. If this third side "wins," the whole state loses. Its strategy is to starve public schools in order to force them to become better. This has been a school finance philosophy for decades, and there is no evidence that it works.

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