



# Educational Opportunities in Hard Times:

The Impact of the Economic Crisis on Public Schools and Working Families

UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education and Access

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report can be accessed online at <http://www.edopp.org>

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*“It’s the bleakest I’ve ever seen.”*

— Principal of a southern California high school describing the impact of the recession on her school and students

Even *before* the current recession began, California public schools were ill-equipped to meet the learning and social welfare needs of many students. Consider this brief glimpse of California’s serious education challenges, and standing compared to the rest of the nation, just a year and a half ago. *Before the recession* - -

- One in six California students lived in families that earned below the federal poverty level, and more than a half lived in families with earnings that qualified students for the federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program.
- Many California students experienced unstable housing and lack of secure access to food.
- Ranking 46<sup>th</sup> of all states in per pupil expenditures, California provided its students with less access to quality learning conditions than the rest of the nation.
- California’s middle school and high school classrooms were more overcrowded than classrooms in any other state.
- California’s high school counselors served more students than counselors anywhere else in the nation.
- While almost all California students receive less than students in other states, students attending schools serving primarily low-income Latino, African American, and American Indian students were the most likely to experience critical problems in their schools. For example, such schools were 8 times as likely as other schools in the state to face severe shortages of qualified teachers.

Today, these conditions, challenges, and comparisons are worse. Much worse. Today, for example, *one in four* California students lives in poverty and is likely attending a school with reduced funding, larger classes, and fewer instructional materials.

To illuminate the current, “real time” effects of the recession on California children and public schools, UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) conducted interviews with a representative sample of 87 principals from across the state. The immediacy of these interviews removes a certain abstraction that often accompanies data reports on California’s schools. The principals speak of conditions that children face today, on Monday morning when the school bell rings, and when they leave school and return to their families.

The principals in our study lead public schools that proportionately represent California’s wide diversity of geography, school size, school type, and student demographics. Our interviews reveal common themes across the socio-economic and demographic diversity of the principals’ communities and differences in the degree of impact on families and school programs. Key findings include:

**1.** The needs of California’s children and youth have grown and are not being met despite extraordinary efforts by California educators. More than half of the principals report that students’ needs for health, psychological, or social services have increased with the recession; many other principals report a continuation of extremely high social needs.

*There is “an epidemic [of hunger]....  
A lot of students don’t eat at all when they go home.”*

*“I don’t go through a day that I don’t hear three or four people say  
they need to move because of layoffs.”*

Educators have responded by connecting students and families with social service providers or by contributing food and clothing. In extraordinary cases some have taken in homeless youth to live with them. Nonetheless, budget cuts to social welfare program and school services have left the system with less capacity to respond to these growing needs.

*“We make referrals, but they’re having a hard time keeping up.”*

**2.** Budget cuts have led to teacher lay offs and larger classes. The vast majority of principals reported that teachers in their schools have been laid off, “bumped,” or threatened with lay off. Actual lay offs were far more likely to be reported in high-poverty as low-poverty schools. Principals reported that such layoffs affect school culture and teaching and learning.

*“As we lose teachers, critical mass changes ... it will trickle into the classroom.”*

Teacher layoffs also led to class size increases in most California schools. Class size increases were particularly pronounced in elementary schools.

**3.** Budget cuts also have affected students’ access to learning materials. Most principals reported delaying or cutting back scheduled purchase of new textbooks.

*“It’s almost like the state is giving you one year worth of money but you have two years [of need]. ... The state doesn’t give you enough, you are always a year behind.”*

Similarly, almost all principals reported reductions to instructional materials and supplies.

*“We have almost nothing to get through the year. This is terrible.”*

**4.** Programs outside the instructional core (of reading and math) were cut back or eliminated, with many costs shifted to parents. Most principals reported that summer school was reduced or eliminated. High-poverty schools were farm more likely than low-poverty schools to eliminate summer school outright. At times, this elimination of summer school was quite dramatic. Students in one Central Valley elementary school were “literally told to go home.” In addition, roughly half of principals surveyed reported reductions to after school programs, field trips, art and music.

*Programs are “hanging by the skin of their teeth.”*

**5.** The vast majority of principals report reductions to professional development. Many described how budget cuts limited instructional improvement.

*“Principals [are] dealing with problems on campus instead of focus[ing] on student learning as we should be and the state is mandating us to do. It’s less resources, more distractions, while trying to run the school.”*

**6.** Local strategies aimed at filling budget gaps are likely to exacerbate inequalities. On average, low-poverty schools in our study received far more in donations than high poverty schools.

These findings point to tremendous needs of California students and California public schools—needs that the federal government is best positioned to address in the short term. The short term is crucial for the millions of students who can’t wait for the economy to improve. They only get one chance to have a high-quality and equal education. But California also needs to reform its system for funding public schools.

*“I’ve lived in California most of my life and I find it hard to believe how bad we have become with our funding for education.”*

This report represents the fourth annual California Educational Opportunity Report produced by UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education and Access (IDEA) in partnership with UC ACCORD. As in past reports, we examine the quality and distribution of educational opportunities across California’s public schools. A broader set of analyses of educational conditions and outcomes, including reports on each California legislative district and reports on each public high school and middle school in the state, can be found online at [www.edopp.org](http://www.edopp.org).