

California Struggles to Repair Its Troubled Schools

By Richard Lee Colvin

News about public education in California, long lauded as one of the nation's most innovative systems, seemed to go from bad to worse in the mid-1990s. And this apparent slide made front-page headlines.

The state's fourth graders were tied for last—behind Mississippi—in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In math, the picture was about the same for fourth graders and only slightly better—32nd out of 40 states—among eighth graders. In science, eighth graders were more than a year behind the national average. If the national rankings were cause for concern, so were the state's own reckonings. Half of the students admitted to the California State University system—who, by definition, are among the top third of the state's graduates—required remedial help in math or English. Additionally, that number was rising as the 22-campus system toughened its entrance exams to bring them in line with the additional high school courses students were being expected to take.

“The single most powerful theme that emerged from a 20-page Los Angeles Times report on the state's educational system was that educators and, to some degree, parents are struggling against an undertow of concern and self-doubt that leads to waves of self-examination. Teachers in particular are weary of the tiring cycle of reform, followed by neglect, followed by a new reform, each of which is introduced with high hopes and little follow-through.”

By mid-1997, the unrelentingly negative news had caught the eyes of editors at the *Los Angeles Times*. Were the schools in as bad shape as the parade of stories made it seem, they asked? If so, how did they get that way? And what were the chances they would get better? Answers to those questions were readily available but depended on whom you asked. And, since the state had thrown out its standardized testing system in 1990 and botched an attempt to revive it, there was little official data to support or gainsay those answers. Besides, no one seemed interested in analyzing the official data that did exist or holding anyone accountable for addressing the problems. Critics of public education seized on the bad news, mining it for causes. The embarrassingly bad reading performance was laid at the feet of “whole language” instruction, which in the late 1980s had shifted the emphasis away from skills and toward enjoyment of literature. The math debacle was blamed on “new-new math,” the well-intentioned effort to lure more students into taking higher level courses. No one had thought that idea was bad; it simply turned out to be a difficult task without omitting some of what makes math hard and sometimes boring—the practice and the abstractions.

But public education's champions had their defense ready as well. California was just beginning to emerge from a devastating economic slump that had squeezed the schools' budgets. The state ranked near the bottom nationally in the per-pupil ratio of school librarians, library books, school psychologists, reading specialists, and counselors. Class sizes were the largest in the nation—30 or more on average. Plus, they said, the schools had absorbed an unprecedented influx of immigrants from Mexico and Central America, who presented challenges involving language and poverty. All

things considered, educators said, they were doing a pretty decent job.

Political Bantering

Whatever the causes, the schools' troubles were increasingly in the spotlight. Republican Governor Pete Wilson earned the enmity of public education supporters—notably the powerful California Teachers Association—for his support of publicly funded vouchers for children to attend private schools. The CTA had bankrolled the overwhelming 1993 defeat of a ballot measure that would have done just that, and Wilson had responded by proposing to end automatic tenure of teachers and to make firing veteran teachers easier. Yet, in the 1994 gubernatorial campaign, Democrat Kathleen Brown all but ignored the issue believing it was less important to voters than crime and the economy. Many now say, in hindsight, that her strategy steered away from one of Wilson's biggest weaknesses. Handed a bye, he pulled out a victory.

By then, however, the economy was beginning to rebound. The massive job losses in aerospace and other defense industries that had been the downside of the end of the Cold War were abating. Hollywood, small business, the computing explosion, and exports were fueling an increasingly robust economy, and, by state law, most of the tax revenues those activities generated had to be ploughed into education. Wilson, not wanting to see the largesse wind up in teachers' paychecks, instead launched a multi-billion-dollar effort to reduce class sizes in the early grades to no more than 20 pupils. He attached that initiative to a comprehensive reading improvement plan that would pay for new books and extensive training, all aimed at reemphasizing the importance of phonics,

grammar, spelling, and other skills. Math was to be targeted as well.

The class size reduction program, now set to begin its third year, is one of the most costly state-level education reform plans ever. It is also tremendously popular, causing politicians of every stripe to vow to expand it and make it permanent.

By 1998, education had become the voters' top concern. Polls conducted on behalf of the California Teachers Association were showing that worries about education had risen faster in the state than nationally. Meanwhile, crime and the economy were dropping down the list. A *Los Angeles Times* poll showed the same thing although not as dramatically. Between March 1994 and December 1997, the percentage of those surveyed identifying education as the state's most significant problem rose from 14% to 23%. Crime, on the other hand, was seen as the state's greatest problem by 49% in 1994 but only 37% identified it as such in 1997. Worries over the economy were fading as well, with those seeing it as the top issue falling from 49% in 1994 to 21% in 1997.

Not surprisingly, then, education was the central focus in the June 1998 Democratic primary, as Lieutenant Governor Gray Davis, Congresswoman Jane Harman, and wealthy businessman Al Checchi all tried to out-promise one another. Each vowed more money and textbooks, more demanding academic standards, more time in school, and policies to ensure that teachers are competent. The polling done for the CTA confirmed the political wisdom of focusing on education—voters were leaning toward any politician who focused on the topic almost regardless of the specifics of their proposals. Now that Davis has won the primary, education is surely to be the top issue in his general election battle with Attorney General Dan Lungren, a conservative Republican. Lungren, like his predecessor, supports publicly funded vouchers for students to attend private schools. Davis, endorsed by the teachers' unions, opposes vouchers.

The Cycle of Frustration

In the fall 1997, the *Times* launched a three-pronged independent examination of the quality of the state's 1,000 public school districts and 8,000 schools which serve 5.6 million students. In November and December, the *Times* poll in partnership with UCLA's Center for the Study of Evaluation, explored the perceptions and experiences of students, teachers, and parents statewide. Throughout the fall, *Times* reporters and computer specialists, with the help of education and statistical experts at UCLA's Center, analyzed dozens of databases on test scores, teacher qualifications, course-taking patterns, student backgrounds, and much more. Finally, reporters were sent to seven high schools around the state for a week to observe education's front lines. The schools were chosen to reflect the state's tremendous diversity economically, academically, and ethnically. For three days in May

1998, the *Times* published its findings in 20 full pages of stories, pictures, graphs, and charts which were assembled in three special, stand-alone sections. The single most powerful theme that emerged was that educators and, to some degree, parents are struggling against an undertow of concern and self-doubt that leads to waves of self-examination. Teachers in particular are weary of the tiring cycle of reform, followed by neglect, followed by a new reform, each of which is introduced with high hopes and little follow-through.

That cycle has led to a profound sense of frustration. Forty-six percent of the teachers surveyed said fewer than half of their students are reading at the appropriate grade level. Moreover, many teachers said they don't bother giving students homework because they don't think it will get done, and they don't have enough textbooks to send home or they don't think students will be able to understand the reading involved.

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High school teachers, however, are not sure how to help students who are behind. “It isn't our job in high school to teach reading; it's to teach thought,” said Camille Konigsberg, who chairs the English Department at Manual Arts High School in central Los Angeles. The impact of the reading difficulties is unmistakable. Valuable class time is taken up with reading aloud; science teachers write outlines of chapters on the blackboard and then have their students copy the material word for word as the teacher reads it. Math skills are lacking as well. A 10th grade algebra class in Manual Arts' College Preparatory Magnet program covers rationalizing fractions, arithmetic that should have been learned in elementary school. In a physical science class at Manual Arts, the teacher has to omit experiments that require math because most of the 11th graders have yet to pass algebra. Teachers tell the same tales whether they work at a well-funded, nearly all-white school in Bakersfield, at a school in Anaheim serving a transient population of low-income laborers, or at a school in San Diego near the Mexican border that is an entry point for immigrants.

Good Grades but Dismal Test Scores

Test scores released in July confirm the anecdotal and survey evidence included in the *Times'* series. Not surprisingly, the numbers are far worse for students not fluent in English. That confirmed a longstanding public perception that the state's heavy emphasis on instruction in a child's native

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language had doomed children to poor academic performance in English. In June, voters approved by a 61% to 39% margin a proposition that all but eliminates that method in California classrooms. Only about a third of the state's 9th, 10th and 11th graders were reading above the 50th percentile. Yet the seriousness of the situation is masked by other statistics: dropout rates, for example, appear to be down as they are nationally, and, compared to 10 or 15 years ago, California students of today are taking far more college preparatory courses, especially African-American students. But the additional course work does not appear to be paying off: SAT scores have remained stagnant overall and they have dropped among the best students, those who reported getting all A's in their courses. Meanwhile, the percentage of students requiring remedial courses at the California State University system and even the elite University of California system is growing.

Poverty, Mobility, and Language

A key reason for such performances by students seems to be poverty. The percentage of poor students has more than doubled to 28% during the past three decades, and California schools are unable to overcome the effect of deprivation. A UCLA analysis of a decade's worth of data found that poverty explained 44% of the difference between any two schools' performance on the SAT college entrance exam. The finding was so powerful it stunned the experts. Poverty is "not insurmountable," UCLA researcher Richard Brown said. "But it's certainly a steep climb to overcome it."

In addition, California's students are the most mobile in the country. About 75% of them change schools at least once before the 12th grade and a third change schools three or more times for reasons unrelated to normal promotion. The more a student moves, the lower his or her chance of graduating from high school, according to an analysis of the records of 13,000 students done by Russell Rumberger, an education pro-

fessor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Moreover, language difficulties compound the problems many students face: nearly one in four California students is classified as "limited English proficient," meaning they are not fluent.

Is Poverty Destiny? Not Among Asian-Americans

To be sure, poverty is not necessarily destiny, especially among the state's growing number of children of Asian descent. Asian students work harder than those of other ethnicities including white students. Proportionally, twice as many Asians as whites take the college

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preparatory courses required for admission to the University of California. In the areas of math and science, the differences are even more stark, with Asian-American students three times as likely as whites to take advanced courses.

A *Times* computer-data analysis found that students in Latino- and Asian-majority schools were quite similar in two key ways. In both types of schools, 24% to 30% of students spoke limited English and about 20% were from families on welfare. Yet, 45% of the seniors in the majority Asian schools completed the University of California's required regimen of college-preparatory courses compared to 30% of the seniors in the mostly Latino schools.

Research by the College Board, the New York-based organization that sponsors the SAT, also showed marked disparities in performance. Similar percentages of Asian and Latino test-takers last year spoke a language other than English at home, for example, and proportionally more whites than Asians came from families earning more than \$40,000 annually. Asians, however, had the highest grade-point averages. Clearly, factors beyond the control of schools—students' poverty and motivation—have a profound impact on academic outcomes.

Given all of the issues, it's not surprising that 71% of Californians polled thought the quality of public education in the state was fair or poor (see Figure 1). Among African-American parents, that figure was a stunning 83%. About half of those surveyed said their local school was only fair or poor, and that number rose to 70% among African-American parents. On curriculum issues, Californians say too many kids are simply passed from grade to grade without learning necessary skills. That perception was confirmed by the poll of teachers, 42% said they simply cannot hold a student back and 32% said it would be difficult to do so.

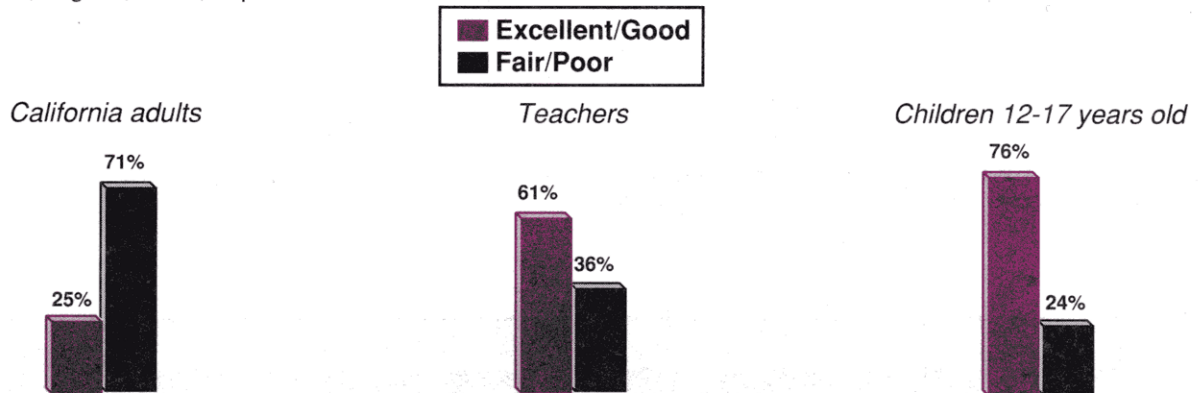
Lack of Money Takes Its Toll

The biggest problem the schools face, according to the poll, is a lack of funding. One in five respondents cited budget cuts as the most significant issue. The second biggest concern was large class sizes, and was cited by 17% of those surveyed. In 1965, California's per-pupil spending was fifth-highest in the nation. That figure was the statewide average, of course, meaning that many districts spent far less and many spent far more. By 1995, the state's per-pupil spending had fallen to 41st in the nation. Now, it is on the rise but the California still ranks only 37th, spending about \$900 below the national average.

Meanwhile, in the past three decades, the state absorbed a huge number

Figure 1: School Ratings Differ Among the General Public, Teachers, and Students

Question: How would you rate the overall quality of education in public schools in California today? Would you rate it excellent, or good, or fair, or poor?



Note: Children 12-17 years old were asked, "How would you rate the quality of education you have received in school: would you say it is excellent, or good, or fair, or poor?" See pages 24-27 for more data from this survey.

Source: Survey by *Los Angeles Times*, November-December 1997.

of immigrants, saw the poverty rate more than double, and watched as many of its buildings fell into disrepair. What does that lack of money mean? For one thing, it means that fewer kids attend summer school. In the 1970s, the Los Angeles Unified School District enrolled 300,000 students in summer school. This year, fewer than 70,000 will be signed up.

Less money also means that buses for field trips are a rarity paid for by the PTA in most districts. Music and art teachers are so scarce that in most districts they travel from school to school. Fees for extra curricular activities are routine. Many students do not go out for sports because they cannot afford the fees for uniforms and transportation. A lack of textbooks is also a serious problem. The poll of students in middle- and high school found that a quarter had to share textbooks and 42% said their textbooks were seriously out of date. In a telling glimpse of what goes on inside schools, 48% said they did not use the restrooms at their school because they were filthy, out-of-order, or ill-supplied.

A Shortage of Teachers

But money alone will not be enough to fix the problems; the state also has a serious and growing shortage of quali-

fied teachers. Only two-thirds of the teachers in the 680,000-student Los Angeles school district are permanent, fully-credentialed teachers. Statewide, more than 31,000 classrooms are presided over by such teachers. On any particular day, 2,000 of those classrooms are staffed by "long-term substitutes" who have little or no experience but are allowed to work a month in one assignment before moving on. Those teachers are not even required to pass a test showing they possess skills expected of most 10th graders.

The teacher shortage looms large as the state continues to invest in having no more than 20 students per teacher in kindergarten through grade three. The class-size reduction program, in fact, exacerbated the problem because it required one new teacher for every two classrooms in which the number of students was lowered.

The shortage of trained teachers also threatens the success of another set of reforms that is in the formative stage. The state Board of Education is adopting "standards" in reading, math, social studies, and science. The reading and math documents, the only ones finalized, represent a dramatically more ambitious set of expectations for all but the most aca-

demically rigorous schools. In math, for example, all students will be expected to take the equivalent of two years of algebra and one year of geometry. Already, however, an estimated 46% of the state's high school math classes now are taught by teachers who neither majored nor minored in the subject.

California's education establishment has a long history of innovating to improve education, and evidence of the various initiatives can be seen in schools across the state. But the good intentions rarely lead to sustained effort, close monitoring, and insistence on results. In a state where the needs of the students are so dramatic, such shortsightedness and lack of attention has produced an educational system that, on the whole, is inadequate for the economic needs of the state. To be sure, there are many good schools but there are far more where too many students are being graduated without the skills to survive either in college or on the job.



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