



## Children's Advocacy Institute

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### What we're not getting from 'the education governor' by Robert C. Fellmeth

"My first, second and third priority is education. . . . The time has come to restore California's public schools to greatness." -- Gov. Gray Davis, Jan. 4, 1999

Exciting things are happening in California public education. The Davis administration initiates testing, performance accountability for schools, a reading skills initiative. In San Diego, new bond authority promises the repair of dilapidated structures, and new school Superintendent Alan Bersin puts children before the job security of principals or teacher-union territoriality. But there is an important element missing here and statewide. While fiscal resources alone do not guarantee success ("throwing money at the problem" is the cliché), simply demanding better performance without additional investment can be just as futile. We need both accountability and effective new investment.

A good example of one target comes from the nationwide reading and math tests of 1998. Then-Gov. Pete Wilson started class-size reduction in kindergarten through third grade in 1996. Research suggests substantial gains occur when class size is cut to 20 children or less. And early results in California range from a moderate 3 percent comparative gain in one study, to 14 percent by another measure. Even the lower figure is significant given the mere one to two years of exposure to smaller classes for those involved. A small gain repeated year after year can take a momentous cumulative difference. And further improvement is likely with additional investment in teacher quality (compromised in the sudden rush to add classrooms over the last three years).

California once had one of the finest public education systems in the nation. It took 20 years of disinvestment to lower it to near the bottom, with class-size increases a key indicator. The state fell so far behind that even the recent K-3 increases in teachers raised the state only to 49th -- we passed one state.

Child advocates expected the new "education governor" to demand a budget to restore our schools, including teacher quality investment and the phased extension of class-size reduction to grades four to 12. To accomplish this, we need a four- to five-year concerted effort totaling \$6 billion to \$8 billion just to move California above the national average in spending for K-12 per child. A similar effort has to be made in higher education where a major capacity increase is essential to assure jobs for our youth in the new international economy.

The California Children's Budget 1999-2000 of the Children's Advocacy Institute proposed \$2 billion in 1999-2000 for K-12 classroom reduction and another \$2 billion for higher education expansion so this effort can get under way. Together, they would add about 5 percent to total state spending. Neither was proposed by Davis or enacted by the Legislature. The final California budget for the fiscal year that began on July 1 adds to K-12 education a grand total of a quarter of 1 percent more than constitutionally required and does not seriously reduce class size or enhance teacher quality.

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Don't be misled by the raw-number percentage increases cited by public officials. Adjusted for inflation and enrollment, the budget adds 3.4 percent to K-12 spending. A third of that is from the federal government, and all but 0.25 percent of the remainder is compelled by Proposition 98. For class-size reduction, we have token ninth- and 10th-grade efforts, each about a fifth of the amount needed and half dependent on uncertain federal funds. The total increase for class-size reduction is less than 10 percent of the K-3 effort under the Wilson administration and only 12 percent of the \$2 billion needed to get the ball rolling.

In sum, K-12 spending overall is virtually the same budget -- or is very likely lower -- than what we would have had under Dan Lungren. How would this Davis campaign pledge have sounded? "Education is my first, second, and third priority. So I solemnly pledge that to the minimum amount, which I contend my opponent Dan Lungren would invest in K-12 education, I shall add . . . one quarter of 1 percent more!" Hardly your classic inspirational message.

We have 25 percent child poverty, with more than a third of our children scoring extremely low in national testing and living below or near the poverty line. We face a possible huge, intractable underclass unless we make now -- as in yesterday -- a decisive commitment to education basics and to higher education expansion.

The 600-page California Children's Budget for 1999-2000 documents Davis' failure to begin the effort seriously. Instead of class-size reduction and teacher quality enhancement, a major featured addition from the governor is "school safety," including metal detectors. Statistically, schools are about the safest place our children spend time, and juvenile crime and violence is moving substantially down both nationally and in California. Our new resource priorities should be driven by empirical needs, not by public posturing in response to anecdotes or media hyped drama.

What has been the governor's answer to the Children's Budget recitation of available literature about outcome measures, and its itemized recommendations? It is that he cannot "raise the base" for future spending, even from an unexpected \$4.3 billion surplus available, because he is tied to existing taxes and the surplus may not come again. We should ask why \$28 billion per year in tax loopholes (including several added in the new budget) is not "expanding the base." That is a base which continues unless affirmatively ended, and which takes a two-thirds legislative vote to retract. It is now a decade of such favor accumulation (arranged by the 1,500 full-time lobbyists circling the capitol) which explains the momentous decline in public investment in our children over the past 20 years.

We also might ask what is wrong with "raising the base" if the new level is still below the national average in K-12 spending? Are we, one of the wealthiest states in the union, unwilling to make a future commitment to invest in our children at the national average? Here is a thought for the governor and Legislature to ponder: Those children are our base.

Davis and the Legislature have misread the public. They are deathly afraid of the "tax-and-spend" label. But that moniker hung on George Bush was not based on his public spending or tax decisions after his election. We are happy to have more tax money invested in education, so long as it is effectively spent. We were angry because Bush swore he would not raise taxes ("Read my lips") and then did it. It was the deceit, not the taxes. Davis should ponder that precedent carefully as he and the Legislature explain to the electorate their priorities as actually enacted in relation to their respective campaigns.

It takes years of work and major investment commitment -- together with school and parental accountability -- to turn our schools around. The current budget puts off this investment effort yet another year and yet another graduating class, while adults spend a third of their personal income proportionately less per child than did our parents. In terms of commitment to our children, most politicians of both parties are, as usual for the 1990s, talking the talk, and taking another walk.