

# Education crisis in California

David Brown  
26 January 2011

After several years of continuous budget cuts, California's schools are in dire straits. The state superintendent of public instruction, Tom Torlakson, went so far as to call it a "state of financial emergency." Newly re-elected Democratic Governor Jerry Brown's proposed budget, however, includes widespread cuts to higher education and social services in an attempt to close the \$25.4 billion deficit.

All of these cuts are an attempt to make the poorest sections of society pay for the financial crisis caused by bankers' greed.

The \$1.4 billion of proposed cuts to California's higher education have already prompted tuition increases in the UC, CSU, and community college systems, alongside mass layoffs and program cuts.

Brown's budget proposal freezes funding levels for kindergarten through high school (K-12). The unions and media have widely reported this as "sparing" K-12 education, but the actual situation in schools shows that nothing has been "spared." Instead of desperately needed increases, Brown's proposal will conditionally keep funding at current levels for the 2011-2012 school year. Due to increased attendance, a funding freeze results in lower amounts of spending per pupil.

California is already ranked 47th in the nation in per pupil spending. If a set of regressive taxes are not approved by the voters, then billions will be cut from the already reeling education system. Perhaps most importantly, California's schools will continue to decline even if "spared," as prior cuts continue to have their effect.

Over the past three years \$18 billion has been cut from California's K-12 system. This has resulted in thousands of layoffs, increased class sizes, shortened school years, and either reduced or eliminated music and art programs.

According to State Superintendent Torlakson, 58 percent of schools have cut educational materials, 48

percent have cut nursing and counseling staff, 35 percent have increased class sizes, and nearly half have reduced employee pay. Even with all these reductions, 174 out of 1,077 school districts will be insolvent within three years at the current level of funding.

Unsurprisingly, these cuts have affected the districts covering low-income families the hardest. As state funding has dried up, schools have had to rely on local taxes or fundraising to maintain their programs and class sizes. As reported in the San Jose *Mercury News*, parents in the Cupertino Union School District managed to raise \$2.5 million to keep student-teacher ratios at 20-1 for their youngest students. In districts where the community has not cobbled together enough to pick up the state's slack, the ratio is routinely over 30-1.

Beyond suffering more cuts, schools serving low-income communities have a higher proportion of inexperienced teachers, according to statistics gathered by the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (CFTL). Due to collective bargaining agreements with the teachers' unions, the last teachers hired are the first to be fired. During the current crisis, this has meant that in addition to suffering more cuts, poorer schools have had higher turnover rates as their low-seniority teachers are fired in greater numbers.

This concentration of layoffs in poor communities reached an extreme pitch last year when over half the teachers at three middle schools in the Los Angeles area were laid off, sparking a case brought against the Los Angeles Unified School District by the American Civil Liberties Union. In one school, Liechty, a full 72 percent of the teachers received layoff notices. The case settled last October, but without any statewide movement against layoffs, the protection afforded these schools came at the expense of others. Regardless of where they take place, further layoffs will have far reaching consequences.

According to the CFTL's recent report, "California's Teaching Force 2010: Key Issues and Trends," the entire state faces a looming teacher shortage. Due to the ever-worsening job conditions fewer people have been seeking teaching credentials. Between 2001 and 2007 there has been a 40 percent decrease in the number of enrollees in teacher preparation programs. Coupled with an expected rise in the number of students, California's capacity for teaching its children has been alarmingly diminished.

Rebuilding teacher certification programs will take time in addition to money. With inadequate funds currently allocated to the professional development of teachers, California will be unable to reduce class sizes in the future even if funding were made available. Low-income schools in particular will find it harder to fill positions with qualified teachers.

All of these facts underscore that the standard of education in California will continue to decline in light of the cuts announced by the Brown administration. Schools serving low-income communities have been and will be the hardest hit. To complete the picture, we must look at the debate over evaluating teachers based on student performance and the charter school movement.

In the context of severe cuts to professional development programs, teacher evaluations can only help decide who to fire. Teacher evaluations in the Los Angeles area have led to a witch-hunt spearheaded by the *Los Angeles Times* and other media outfits, as charter school advocates seek to blame low test scores on mythically ineffectual and overpaid teachers protected by tenure.

Instead, as evidenced by the correlation between low-income and under-performing schools, the main cause of low test scores is systemic poverty. Already existing funding inequalities have been exacerbated by the budget cuts. When the majority of support structures for teachers and students have been cut and class sizes balloon, it is no surprise that performance goals are not met. According to Torlakson, California's schools need new revenue if they are to recapture their former quality.

But Jerry Brown's political history has already demonstrated his allegiance to big business. The class interests he represents will further plunder social wealth and reduce what was once an exemplary educational

system to rubble. In coordination with the unions, Brown's proposed budget presents parents within two unacceptable choices: either accept the tax extensions for the working class, making low-income districts even less capable of picking up the state's slack, or see billions more cut from K-12 funding causing a more sudden failure.

In a move to gather support for his tax measures, Brown replaced the majority of the State Board of Education with members more amenable to the California Teachers Association. The union has signaled its support of Brown's budget and is not making any demands on him to refund education. According to a statement by their president, David Sanchez, they are "glad to see Governor Brown present a balanced approach to solving the state's deficit."

Education, like other fundamental social services, is being sacrificed at the expense of workers and students. Fund slashing and privatization will serve the purpose of maintaining the rotten foundations of a diseased system and funneling massive amounts of wealth from the bottom to the top. Inequality in California is so staggering that the wealth of the richest Californian, Lawrence Ellison, CEO of Oracle Corporation, estimated at \$27 billion, would eliminate the entire state deficit.

No improvement can be expected from the new administration. The two-party system is primarily responsible for the current crisis and will continue to defend interests that are counter to those of working people. The struggle for free, quality, and democratic education demands the fight for socialism, where the satisfaction of human needs instead of the pursuit of corporate profits is the goal.



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