

# California's draft budget attacks public school system

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California Governor Jerry Brown unveiled a draft State budget on January 6 that includes major cuts for schools, community colleges, kindergarten and preschool education.

The state faces a fiscal deficit of at least \$9.2 billion for the new fiscal year beginning in July. Governor Brown, a Democrat, proposes to cover this deficit through a combination of tax increases and budget cuts. Brown has launched an initiative for a referendum in November for sales tax and income tax surcharges that will raise \$6.9 billion.

The draft budget assumes that the tax increase will pass. The remaining \$2.3 billion will be raised through cuts in childcare and other social programs. If the tax measure is not approved, the budget would trigger at least \$5.4 billion in cuts, including the slashing of \$4.8 billion from the \$52.5 billion earmarked for public schools.

The impact of another \$4.8 billion in cuts would be disastrous for schools, particularly since that trigger would take effect during the middle of the school year, forcing school districts to sharply reduce spending, take on debt, or to make anticipatory cuts in the first half of the year. Most districts are expected to take the latter course of action.

California public education has yet to recover from the pre-recession budget of 2007-2008. Per-pupil funding has dropped \$652, to \$7,583. The number of full-time teachers has fallen from 306,000 to 272,000, increasing the student/teacher ratio from 19.4 to 21.9; only two other states, Arizona and Utah, have higher ratios. The number of school days has fallen below 180 for one-third of the school districts in the state. Special programs, such as summer school, art, adult education, music, high school class reduction, school libraries, athletic and foreign language programs have seen widespread cuts.

Even if the Governor's tax is approved this November, per pupil spending is expected to drop another 1 percent. If the tax measure fails, per pupil funding would drop 6 percent to \$7,135 per student.

Last November a University of Southern California/*Los Angeles Times* poll indicated that 64 percent of Californians believe that school budgets have been cut far too much and would favor higher taxes to increase school funding.

Budget cuts have had a similar impact on community colleges. As student fees were raised from \$26/unit to \$46/unit,

per student funding dropped by about \$310, from \$5,570 to \$5,260. The drop would have been even worse without an enrollment cap instituted by the state at the time. Compared to 2007-2008, community colleges are now operating with \$650 million less. Community colleges provide 20 percent fewer classes than in 2009.

Since the financial crisis began in 2007, tax receipts have fallen from \$100 billion to \$85 billion. Over the same period, the cumulative budget cuts have exceeded \$35 billion and are expected to pass the \$40 billion mark this year, even if the tax package is passed.

The cuts to schools would have been even more draconian had the legislature not authorized schools to borrow from credit institutions. The draft budget would begin to refund school districts for some of those loans, though it is not clear when or how. Schools also benefited from a one-time infusion of \$1.2 billion in funds as part of the now-depleted federal stimulus package.

Recent reports from the State Controller's office indicate that state income tax receipts are short of expectations by nearly \$600 million dollars. To pay its bills the State had to borrow \$1 billion on February 22 and is expected to borrow another \$2 billion on March 1.

Brown's tax proposal would raise income taxes on those with taxable incomes that exceed \$250,000. It would also raise the state sales tax, currently set at 7.35 percent, by half a percentage point.

"Restore California," a competing proposal for a temporary tax—the so-called "Millionaires Tax to Restore Funding for Education and Essential Services Act of 2012"—would impose higher income taxes across the board, with the wealthiest Californians paying the most. If it gets on the ballot and passes, it is expected to raise \$10 billion over its 12-year life. Civil rights attorney Molly Munger is sponsoring the tax. If this tax were passed, all of its monies would be earmarked for schools. Governor Brown requested that Munger drop her measure on the grounds that competing proposals may increase the likelihood of failure.

When it comes to education, the governor's budget proposal is not just about money. In it are reforms of a type that further the national campaign against education and teachers by

replacing one-half of state “categorical” mandates [such as transportation, physical education or class size mandates] with block grants that schools can spend as they like. School districts would be free, for example, to cut the school year—and teachers’ pay—rather than lay off teachers. The block grants would also be tied to “performance” standards. Community colleges would also be subject to the block grant proposal together with the reduction of mandates. No increase in enrollment is contemplated for community colleges.

Under the budget plan, school districts that do not meet goals would be subject to loss of funds. Furthermore, the budget proposes a 15 percent increase in charter school funding. Charter schools would also be allowed to compete for block grants against school districts. The governor is a long-time supporter of charter schools. While mayor of Oakland, Brown founded two charter schools, the Oakland Military Institute and the Oakland School for the Arts.

The budget also proposes that education be funded according to a “weighted student formula,” which would assign more money to two factors that “drive up costs” to schools, low-income students, or students with limited English proficiency. There is no requirement that any of this extra money be actually used to benefit these students.

At the same time, the budget cancels any new TK programs [transitional kindergarten, the first year of a two-year kindergarten program] and reduces slots for preschool programs targeted to low income three and four-year olds; state payments to pre-school providers will be reduced by 10 percent. The part-day rate for a child will be reduced from \$21.22 to \$19.10. The full-day rate will be reduced from \$34.38 to \$30.94. These paltry rates make the provision of quality pre-school services totally impossible.

Monthly income levels to qualify for preschool programs will be reduced in the new budget, from \$3,518 to \$3,090 per household, cutting 7,800 low-income children from the preschool program. The expected saving will be \$24 million. For the 2014-2015 fiscal year, Brown is proposing eliminating full time and year round preschool care to part time, part year. To be eligible, families would require vouchers from their county welfare departments. Working single parents would be forced to pay out-of-pocket during part of the year.

The age eligibility for TK will also be adjusted. By manipulating age requirements for TK, Brown’s budget will reduce enrollment in the already existing TK programs, saving the State \$675 million in 2014.

Each one of these changes, pushed through by their backers with the pretext of accountability, efficiency and of meeting student needs, represent an attack on public school teachers and public education as a whole. The “pay for performance” funding method is fully consistent with the move to privatize public education.

The governor, who was elected with the support of the state teachers unions, has never made any secret of his contempt for

public education. Using the pretext of “career readiness and providing results to parents and educators in a timely fashion,” Brown’s election platform stood for the subordination of public schools to corporate needs.

Brown’s Oakland charter schools reveal some of those ties. While Brown was state attorney general, his two charter schools raised \$9.8 million, \$80,000 per student, between 2006 and 2009 from over 200 corporations and banks. According to a 2009 report by the *Sacramento Bee*, “donors backing one or both of the Oakland schools have included oil giants, banks, mortgage lenders, utilities, health plans and telecom giants, and Indian tribes with gambling interests,” many of which were regulated and investigated by the attorney general’s department.

The graft continues to this day. A *Los Angeles Times* investigation revealed last August that, while Oakland Schools were being denied funds, millions of corporate dollars were flooding Brown’s “not for profit” charters. Since he became governor, \$2.5 million was raised for both schools, about \$20,000 per student, almost four times what Oakland cash-starved public schools received from the state last year for each of their 50,000 students.

The list of contributors reads like a “who’s who of the politically powerful,” noted the *Times*. None of these contributions are subject to state or federal limits on political contributions. The funds did not just come from corporations; much of it was solicited directly by Brown from trade unions shortly after his inauguration as governor. “This is definitely the new fad in influence peddling,” said Derek Cressman, a spokesman for the government watchdog group Common Cause.

The draft budget moves along an on-going process that mirrors the socioeconomic inequality of California and the US: a two-tiered system of resourced starved public schools competing against each other for funds versus a charter and private school sector that services the needs of the privileged layers of society.



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