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Arnold, GOP Legislators Get an "F" in Education

You don't expect to see school superintendents leading a protest march. But after facing several years of cutting staff, slashing already tight budgets, and begging foundations and businesses to help pay for education basics, the state's local school administrators have reached the limits of their patience.

California currently ranks 46th in per-student spending, with the nation's most overcrowded classrooms and severe shortages of teachers, counselors, nurses, and librarians. And if Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and his Republican colleagues in the state legislature get their way, California could soon have the dubious distinction of ranking last among states in its commitment to public education.

So this Wednesday (February 11) , school chiefs from around the state will travel to Sacramento and rally in front of the State Capital to protest further budget cuts.

To address the state's budget deficit, Schwarzenegger has proposed slashing another \$ 9.7 billion in school spending (in addition to the \$2.8 billion in cuts made in mid-year). If approved by the legislature, these cuts would push California dangerously close to the bottom of the 50 states. The cuts would force local school districts to lay off teachers, close schools, increase class sizes, and eliminate arts and music, advanced placement, tutoring, counseling, and other key programs.

A \$9.7 billion cut to K-12 schools is equivalent to shutting down every school across the state for 34 days; or increasing class sizes statewide by more than 50 percent; or laying off 140,000 classroom teachers or 240,000 bus drivers, janitors, food service workers, maintenance workers, and other education support professionals; or eliminating all music, art and career technical education programs statewide.

As California Superintendent of School Jack O'Connell recently remarked, "Every teacher, every principal, and every superintendent I speak with wonders how we will make it through the next school year."

Seven states - New York, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Maine, Wyoming, Vermont, and Alaska -- spend over \$12,000 per student. The national average is \$9,963. California ranks 46th at \$7,571. To increase California's public school funding to the national average would require adding over \$15 billion.

In California, public schools are mostly funded by the state government because a 1970s state court decision ruled that relying primarily on local funding widened the disparities between rich and poor districts. But no court has yet ruled that the state must provide sufficient funding to guarantee that every child gets a good education.

So what we have in California are public schools that lack the basics that children should be able to take for granted, such as computers in classrooms, up-to-date textbooks, modern science labs, school nurses, library books and librarians, and instruments for music instruction and band.

As we get deeper into the 21st century, California's school children are falling further and further behind their counterparts around the country -- a disastrous trend that can only handicap California's competitiveness in the national and global economy and undermine its future economic prosperity. And this chronic underfunding of education in California directly impacts our national competitiveness because one in eight school children in the entire country is educated in California public schools.

California's school budget crisis is a symptom of something deeper. California is one of only three states that require a two-thirds vote of the state legislature to pass a budget and raise taxes. This rule paralyzes state government from raising the revenues needed to meet basic needs.

Even though the Democrats have large majorities in both the state Assembly (51-29) and the state Senate (24-15, with one vacancy left by Democrat Mark Ridley-Thomas), they still need three Republicans in each house to reach the two-thirds "supermajority" to pass a budget. And the way lawmakers have gerrymandered legislative districts, Republicans feel they are "safe" from defeat by any Democrat. Instead, they worry that they might face a challenge from any even more right-wing Republican. So they refuse to violate the GOP loyalty oath against raising taxes, even as they are about to run California off a fiscal cliff.

Schwarzenegger says he wants to forge a compromise that includes both tax increases and budget cuts, but he lacks the political courage to use his popularity to twist the arms of his fellow Republicans in the legislature, by, among other things, threatening to campaign against them in their home districts. The major pro-education lobby groups have been holding local events throughout the state, as well as rallies in Sacramento, but they haven't yet shown the strength needed to make GOP legislators nervous in their own

backyards . These groups -- the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), the California Teachers Association, the California School Boards Association , and the Association of California School Administrators (the superintendents) -- have been trying to raise public awareness about the state's education crisis. But so far they haven't been able to mobilize enough support to pressure three Republican Assemblymembers and three Republican Senators to vote to raise taxes and adopt a responsible budget.

There is no quick fix to a budget problem that has been festering for years. In the short term, though, the most obvious solution is for the state legislature and Schwarzenegger to agree to raise taxes. A recent poll by the Public Policy Institute of California found that "more Californians say they would rather pay higher taxes and have a state government that provides more services than pay lower taxes and have a state government that provides fewer services." And of all areas of state spending, they want most to protect K-12 school spending from cuts.

The Governor and legislature could, for example, restore the Vehicle License Fee. When Schwarzenegger first ran for governor, he promised to kill the "car tax," a politically clever but fiscally irresponsible move that, with the legislature's approval, has cost the state over \$27 billion in revenues in the past five years. Restoring this progressive tax back to the level that it stood at for 50 years -- equal to 2% of a car or truck's values -- would raise more than \$5 billion a year. In addition, a 1.5 cent increase in the state sales tax would generate over \$7 billion next year. If targeted for public schools, these revenues would stem the expected lay-offs of teachers and cuts to school programs, although California would still be far below the national average in per-student spending.

California should be embarrassed by its failure to support public education. Currently, 4.4 percent of the state's personal income is spent on public schools, If that number were increased to the 5.6 percent level in 1972, when Ronald Reagan was governor, the state would take in an additional \$22 billion. Although he was a conservative Republican , Reagan actually raised taxes while he was governor. In fact, his tax increase of \$1 billion on a \$6 billion budget was proportionately the biggest tax increase in California history.

The budget deadlock isn't the result of the current economic downturn. The "supermajority" rule results in political paralysis and chronically late budgets in good times and bad times. Right now the state suffers from a \$40 billion budget shortfall -- about \$15 billion for the rest of this fiscal year and \$25 next year, according to the nonpartisan California Budget Project. A handful of reactionary Republicans are able to hold California hostage by refusing to vote for a budget unless Democrats agree to slash school spending, environmental protections, rest breaks for workers, and other things that a civilized society should take for granted.

Ultimately, California needs to get rid of the ridiculous rule that requires a "supermajority" two-thirds vote to pass a budget and to raise taxes.

In the meantime, though, parents, teachers, and other supporters of public schools throughout California should let Governor Schwarzenegger and their state legislators

know that our children deserve better than this. They can get more information from the [California Education Coalition](#).

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