

COMMENTARY

# School districts forced into deficit spending

By Sheila Jordan

**S**TATE CONTROLLER Steve Wesley's recent report on the fiscal health of California school districts reveals a shocking fact: More than a third have been forced into deficit spending due to inadequate funding and declining enrollment.

In Alameda County, many districts are tightening their belts as enrollment continues to decline. District school boards and administrators are making tough choices and drastic cuts to make ends meet. With 75 percent of funding now coming from the state rather than local property taxes, school districts are crying out for relief.

The state budget worsens the problem by undercutting Proposition 98, the ballot proposition voters approved in 1988. It sets minimum education funding standards using a formula based on state revenues from the previous three years.

During his election campaign, the governor said he supported this funding protection for public education. Yet, when state revenues unexpectedly perked up this summer, the governor did not use the modest windfall to restore "fair share" funding to the schools, thus breaking his promise to fully fund education.

Further eroding education funding is Proposition 76 on the special election ballot in November. Backed by the governor, it guts Proposition 98. Labeled by backers as the folksy, "Living Within Our Means" initiative, Prop 76 is a disingenuous effort to back away from struggling schools.

A majority of California voters have demonstrated again and again that public education is a top priority and that they want funding for classrooms and schools. The ingredients of good schools is not a secret or difficult recipe. It begins with teachers and administrators who receive the training and support they need.

Where is the "Govenator" who promised to crack through



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the bureaucracies in order to support children, families and communities throughout our state? The governor's oversimplistic funding plan and piecemeal approach to education funding on the ballot is detrimental to public schools and children they serve. We need a coherent plan, a clear vision and strong leadership to restore California schools to their once admirable status as a model for the nation.

Instead, what we get from the governor are trite slogans, sound-bite reform and a blame game that fingers teachers as the culprits in a broken funding system that began with passage of Proposition 13.

The state's current spending plan was approved on a bipartisan vote of the Legislature, making many elected officials complicit in the governor's shameful turning away from his promise. Our Alameda County legislators did not cave to the governor's budget wishes and continue to fight the good fight to restore education funding.

This is not a Bay Area nor a partisan issue, but our most important homeland security issue.

Inadequate funding is destabilizing school districts throughout California, alarming Republicans and Democrats alike. With leadership and a coherent, unified approach, we can make the difficult decisions that will restore adequate funding to California's schools. In the meantime, a resounding "no" on Proposition 76 in the special November election will send a message too loud for Sacramento to ignore.

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