



# Prospects for Education in California

Ronald H. Chilcote

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*Massive budget cuts accompanied by legislation demanding improvements may be cause for gloom—but there are also positive aspects to California's crisis.*

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California education faces a crisis. On one hand, schools are adapting to new legislation calling for school improvement. On the other hand, there is the drastic impact of Proposition 13, the Jarvis-Gann constitutional amendment that reduced the property tax upon which school finance has been based. Given these conditions, I sketch a positive perspective that calls for creativity and resourcefulness. The implications may apply to school systems in other states as well.

## **The Negative Scenario**

The California courts ruled in favor of John Serrano's suit demanding equitable allocation of educational funds to all school districts. Presently school districts must spend a minimum of \$1,200 per student, while some wealthy districts, such as Beverly Hills, spend \$2,800 per student. Legislation passed a few years ago was intended to correct the imbalance over a long term by limiting

increases in income in relation to annual inflation. The courts ruled, however, that equalization of funding must be resolved immediately. As a result, new legislation (Assembly Bill 65) was passed providing that wealthy districts that emphasize quality education lose a percentage of their taxable income, which is then distributed by the state to the poorer districts. At the same time, their budgets are permitted to increase only 3 or 4 percent in an era of 7 to 10 percent inflation. While school districts are permitted to increase taxes through referendums, in practice few ballot measures pass in the face of community resistance to increased property taxes.

Citizen concern with property taxes was manifested in June 1978 with the passage of Proposition 13, a measure that reduced by roughly one-half the revenue generated by property taxes. In my school district this action led to consideration of such options as laying off half the teachers and classified employees; reducing salaries by a

third and the school day proportionately; or letting the schools operate until the money would run out midway during the school year.

Ultimately a good share of the lost revenue was restored by the state's allocation of surplus monies. Dismissed teachers were reinstated, but summer school and adult education programs were cancelled and working hours of noncredentialed staff were reduced during the summer months. Other measures included cutbacks in high school athletics and bus transportation. With no assurance that any state surplus will be available in future years, school districts can look forward to more budget cutting. Such cuts may necessitate a restructuring of programs, alterations in curriculum, and changing styles of teaching and learning.

Pressure for restructuring programs is also evident in the school improvement demands of AB 65. Besides the provision for equalizing school finance, this legislation insists that the school community of parents, citizens, students, and staff assume an ever greater responsibility for society's learning tasks. School site councils representing these constituencies are to be established to focus on two concerns. One relates to developing student abilities to their highest potential in basic skills and other curriculum areas, as well as in personal and social growth. The other directs attention to the school organization and classroom environment, and considers the school's planning and coordination of resources, staff development, and parent and student involvement.

## Issues

A number of issues confront the school and school site council in planning and implementing a program in basic skills. First, the school must commit itself to promoting *competency* in these skills in every student. When a student is found not competent, the school must allocate resources to ensure that the required skills are attained. Planning should consider parent and student reaction if the student cannot meet graduation requirements. Second, learning must be *continuous*: once a minimum standard is reached, individual skill learning must be continuously enhanced. Finally, such attention to individual skills implies possible *restructuring* of curriculum and reallocation of resources.

Given scarce existing resources, schools may allow learning alternatives such as work experience, independent study, coursework at other institutions, or practical demonstration of skills. Other alternatives might be interdisciplinary rather than segmented subjects, team teaching, and extensive involvement of parents and community specialists.

The school site council must also be concerned with school organization and classroom environment. Successful schools must involve students, parents, teachers, administrators, other school personnel, and members of the community in all phases of the educational program. Planning strategies should allow for widespread involvement in decision-making; those who have not participated in the past should be involved. School site councils must identify human, material, and financial resources available to the school, and then establish program priorities and budget recommendations. Programs must include continuous staff development for teachers, other school personnel, paraprofessionals, and volunteers.

At issue will be student involvement in school planning, implementation, and evaluation. The law insists on student input and participation at the secondary level; actually schools at all levels would do well to involve students in the development of a school plan. Students should feel that their school program belongs to them, that they have a say in instructional choices, staff development, parent involvement, and school and classroom environment.

Still another issue will be the fostering of a closer relationship between parents and schools. A plan must spell out parents' roles in the classroom, and incorporate all parents in school activities. The plan should recognize that teaching styles may need to change to accommodate parent participation.

Finally, evaluation of a school plan must involve all participants in the school program: students, staff, parents, and community. Ongoing evaluation and changes of the plan should also be tied to the development of a district master plan.

## Do Better With Less

What are the implications of this school improvement? The state provides only token

financial support for planning, but places increased demands on school programs. A squeeze on monies is combined with pressure for improvement in education. Thus school improvement depends on increased human resources through the participation of parents, students, and community. For school boards such involvement may portend an erosion of their power. District administrators may feel that their centralized authority

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and control will be undermined by the new situation.

### The Positive Perspective

Given the anxiety emanating from these changes, what are the prospects for positive and constructive response and improvement? I turn now to seven possible consequences:

1. The formation of school site councils will result in assessments of school needs, goals, and priorities. Presumably these assessments will involve community questionnaires and school meetings. Such activity will allow a hard look at existing programs, and it may even encourage zero-base budgeting rather than incremental budgeting so that programs can be funded according to needs and priorities.

2. Schools will begin to address the individual needs of all students. It will be necessary to find an approach to identify and deal continuously with individual needs through testing, assessment, diagnosis, and follow-through as education begins to relate to the strengths and weaknesses of every student.

3. Participation and involvement in schools will increase since financial constraints will preclude hiring new personnel. This involvement will

include paraprofessionals, volunteers, and the students themselves in the planning and implementation of a changing school program.

4. Resources of schools and community will be identified. These include potential human, material, and financial resources. Local cultural and art programs might be integrated into school fine arts and performing arts. Fund-raising might include rental of school facilities. A foundation might be established to raise funds for academic programs.

5. Inservice training will involve all existing staff and administrators, as well as volunteers who participate in school programs. In this way ineffective teachers and administrators might become effective. Parents and citizens will adapt more readily to classroom situations.

6. Alternative approaches will be utilized to meet the changing curriculum shaped by the demands of students, parents, teachers, and others who participate in school planning. This may necessitate an interdisciplinary curriculum, team teaching, placement of students in work-study situations and in other experiences outside the classroom, peer teaching, and cross-age tutoring.

7. School decisions will be based on policy in which authority becomes decentralized among the many constituencies (students, citizens, teachers, administrators, and so on). This decentralization and the participation of more people will ensure democratic decision making. Let me illustrate by comparing two views of school district decision making. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Two Views of District Decision Making

Steps	Probable Majority View	Probable Minority View
1	Formulation and resolution of proposal, usually initiated by administration.	Philosophical implications. Issues, problems, needs subject to dialogue by community, schools (staff and students), administration, and board.
2	Ratification of proposal as policy by the board.	Formulation and resolution of proposal with initiative by board, community, schools (staff and students), or administration.
3	Implementation of policy by administration and school (staff and sometimes students).	Decision of proposal as policy by board based on input.
4	Awareness of philosophical implications dependent on crisis or problem not anticipated in Step 1.	Administration and school (staff and students) implementation of policy.

The *majority (conservative) view* assumes that most administrative recommendations are well-conceived and deserving of ratification. This assumption is based upon recognition of the pro-

## A Superintendent's View of Education in California

Jim Slezak

Public education in California may be at the edge of a precipice. Will it survive?

Proposition 13 generated serious problems for education in our state. A total of 2.8 billion dollars was eliminated from school district budgets. SB 54, the one-year "bail-out" financing bill, kept school districts in operation, but left them 800 million dollars underfinanced, so cutbacks had to be made.

Those cutbacks were mostly in nonclassroom areas, but if the legislature does not finance public education adequately, the cutbacks in 1979-80 will be in the education program itself. And the situation will get worse each year, because to balance their budgets, school districts will have to make more and more cuts.

A crisis sometimes brings about significant change for the better. Proposition 13, along with the proposed voucher initiative that could be on the ballot in June 1980, has at least brought education to the attention of every citizen in California. They realize we have reached the point at which public education could be severely damaged or even lost, and many of them are working to save it.

We have the opportunity in California to recognize the essence of democracy and the part public education has played in providing equal opportunity to all our citizens.



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fessional experience, expertise, and competency of the administration. Thus, policy is the outcome of the board ratifying administrative recommendations. There is little or no board initiative, and input is limited to the district administration and school principals. Teacher involvement is minimal, and student participation usually nonexistent. Policy may be a response to a particular complaint or concern, or to state or federal legislation. Implications of these policies are not usually anticipated until implementation has occurred.

The probable *minority (progressive) view* of decision making assumes that school board members as elected representatives are accountable to the citizenry, that input at all levels should shape decisions, and that decisions must come from broad participation. This perspective sees the philosophical implications of a decision as essential; thus, philosophical implications are taken into account *before* a decision is made. Issues, problems, and needs are identified and discussed by all constituencies. Involvement of the community, teaching staff, and students is expected. Initiative may take place on any level: community, schools, board, administration. Implementation of policy usually occurs without substantial problems.

Certainly in California, and probably elsewhere throughout the nation, the majority view prevails, but in the light of the new demands by the people, changes seem inevitable. It is also clear that if school boards, administrators, and site councils were to follow the above seven directions, then the prospects of enhancing and improving education appear great. In this year of crisis, the people must meet the challenge of financial constraints and school reforms with enthusiasm, creativity, and involvement. School boards and educators must assume leadership and ensure that we can cope with the changing needs of our schools.



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