

# The Unanticipated Impact of Proposition 13

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Proposition 13 has had a big impact on public education in California, but not the impact anticipated by both its backers and its critics. It has not slashed school revenues as much as expected. What it has done is turn over control of nearly all education money to the state.

Because of the limit on local property taxes, most money for public education now comes from Sacramento. While the formulas and distributions vary from year to year, it is estimated that 80 percent of public education money comes from the state.

Has Proposition 13 resulted in a real cut-back in education spending? Presumably, that's a simple question, but it's hard to pin down an answer. Only two points are certain: school administrators feel pinched and, based on an analysis of the revenue totals, it's hard to see any drastic reduction in education aid.

"We've felt the reduction most keenly at the high school level," said Phil Linscomb, assistant superintendent for instruction in Los Angeles. In the 11th and 12th grades, schools were forced to eliminate the sixth period of instruction. For many students, that means not taking desired electives such as music, industrial arts, journalism, typing, or student leadership.

Elective courses are not the only ones affected by the reduction in class time. California high school gradu-

ates take fewer core courses than those from other states. Stanford University education professor Michael Kirst, who headed the California state board of education from 1976 to 1980, wondered why California students scored lower on the SATs. According to data he obtained from the questionnaire accompanying the SAT, California students on the average take fewer years of English, math, history, and science. One possible explanation is the cut-back in courses resulting from Proposition 13.

"We've had to reduce the number of courses we offer," said Larry Lucas, assistant superintendent for instruction in Huntington Beach. "With the smaller classes of 18 or 20 students, we've had to say, 'we just can't afford that.'" Some of those lost courses are art or music, but others are the fourth year of English for some students, Lucas said.

Summer school has also been cut drastically in Los Angeles and many other California school districts. L.A. once had more than 200,000 students going to school each summer. This year, about 22,000 were in summer programs. In general, only students who have failed the required "proficiency" test or need an extra course to graduate are allowed to enroll during the summer.

## Supervision Reduced

"The other big reduction for us is our ability to supervise the instructional program," Linscomb said. In Los Angeles, ten administrative areas, covering between 50 and 60 schools, used to have ten curriculum coordinators or instructional supervisors. Now there are four in each area.



"Our ability to develop new materials and upgrade the instructional program has been drastically curtailed," he said. "Take, for example, young teachers just starting out. You shouldn't just throw them into the class on their own. You need a staff person to work with them, talk about the problems, assess their performance, and follow up with them. That's how you build a strong teaching staff," Linscomb said.

The other types of cutbacks cited are also no surprise: deferred maintenance, fewer new textbooks and library materials, fewer supervised recreation programs, fewer counselors, and fewer nurses and doctors

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In June 1978, California's Proposition 13 started a nationwide trend toward reducing the property taxes that finance schools. The result in California has been state control of education's purse strings.



assigned to schools.

Even though these cutbacks are real, it is not as clear that Proposition 13 is the cause. Don Speich, a former education reporter at the *Los Angeles Times* and currently a staff aide in the California state assembly, says declining enrollments may be as much to blame as Proposition 13. State aid is based on how many children are in school. Naturally, a loss of students means a loss of state aid. During the 1970s, the enrollment in the Los Angeles city schools fell from 650,000 to about 525,000. And all the while, the district didn't close a single school. Speich believes a tight L.A.

school budget is due more to district mismanagement than to Proposition 13, a view shared by many in Sacramento.

#### State Controls Money

And the view of those in Sacramento takes on added importance each year for educators around the state. The state legislature controls the financial purse strings for all of public education, thanks to Proposition 13. So far, however, education has fared reasonably well, a credit perhaps to the powerful education lobby in the state capital.

Total public education spending will be slightly more than \$12 billion

in California this year, up from \$9.5 billion in 1977-78, the year before Proposition 13 was passed. In the past three years, total education aid—local, state, and federal—went up 14.5 percent, 9.8 percent, and 6 percent, according to the legislative analyst's office. The average per-student spending has gone up from \$2,047 in 1977-78 to \$2,853 in 1981-82, just about matching the rate of inflation.

Not only is it hard to pinpoint a financial impact from Proposition 13, it's equally difficult to find an impact of state financial control. Educational decisions are still made, by and large, by local school boards and district administrators.

California has a big state education bureaucracy, but it seems to do little other than collect information and issue thick reports that few bother to read. The state doesn't even require that high school students take certain courses to graduate. The fact that California students take fewer core courses than students in other states surprised state education officials supposedly on top of the situation. The state merely issues "curriculum frameworks" which are nothing more than suggestions for local school districts.

While the California legislature is active in setting education policy, the state education department is largely by-passed. In 1976, the legislature enacted a minimal competency requirement for high school graduates, but each district was allowed to make up its own test and set its own standards. Fewer than one percent of high school students were denied a diploma this year because of the test.

Public education in California has its troubles, but they are not due in great measure to either Proposition 13 or state control of education. They are the same troubles afflicting education everywhere—"changing demographics" and "declining public confidence," to use the current clichés. Only about one in four voters has a child in school. Not surprisingly, fewer state legislators are champions of education these days.

And the public perception is that public education is expensive and ineffective. That perception, true or not, influences the votes at budget time. ■

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