

## **The Complexities of the Urban School Crisis: The Roots are in Proposition 13**

Ask any elected official or pollster and they will tell you education is always one of the major concerns of California citizens and residents. Californians understand the need for a well-educated population, yet are frustrated by our young people's low test scores compared to their counterparts around the country and the world. Residents are also concerned about our inability to close the gap. Today, in every election our ballots contain measures or propositions that promise to fix our ailing public education system. National standardized tests confirm students in 35 states have average scores that are significantly higher than California's students. This crisis hits urban school districts especially hard.

Take a quick look at the urban school districts in the Bay Area and around the state, you will find school closures and districts facing extreme financial challenges. Insight to many of the problems facing urban school districts is illuminated when we look at funding priorities and practices. Many urban school districts are losing average daily attendance (A.D.A.) funding. A key funding stream for schools is the money they receive from the state based on how many students attend school. The high cost of housing, and the diversity of issues facing families are pushing students out of the district and preventing our young people from making it to school, these are two factors which contribute to our loss of A.D.A. funding.

Urban school districts are also at a disadvantage when it comes to attracting teachers. The multitude of issues that urban students bring into the classroom is enough to chase talented teachers out of the classroom. As a result urban school districts are forced to pay teachers more. Many school districts are cutting vocational education. Vocational education is the road to a good job with good pay for the non-college bound person. In Oakland, the district is considering discontinuing adult education, which is an avenue for many immigrants and naturalized people who are limited English speakers to learn English and other skills essential for making a living today, and providing an opportunity for their children in the future. Today, immigrant children most often attend public school, thus the promise of America is often a dream deferred or denied.

Many of our urban schools are housed in older buildings, and therefore maintenance and upkeep are more costly to operate. The cost of basics like keeping the facility heated can be more expensive in an older building. A related problem is the cost of creating new schools, which is more difficult to achieve in urban environments. Acquiring land can be extremely costly; and often the land available for school districts are brownfields, these are properties that require expensive toxic clean up.

When looking at these challenges it is important to note that there are good schools in urban areas where students, parents, and faculty are working in unison to make the environment a success. Which of course leads us to the issue of the mad scramble that parents make to get their child into a "good" school.

Where does the solution lie? The “Educational Darwinism” proposed by the Bush Administration and others is not the answer in my opinion. Forcing schools to fend for themselves, merit pay, or allowing your child to leave a failing school does not address the real problems: the challenges facing our communities and families, the inequities that plague our society, and inadequate funding are contributing factors to the challenges in our public education system, especially in urban areas.

The passage of Proposition 13 is clearly a watershed change in the quality of California’s public education. Slashing the taxes on homes and business properties from approximately 3% to 1% devastated school funding. Property taxes are the most stable revenue sources. Sales tax revenue goes up and down with the economy; people are more likely to pay their property tax because failure to do so means losing their home. Many of the Prop. 13 “fixes” utilize sales tax or funding streams that are less consistent than property tax.

I recognize amending Proposition 13 is easier said than done. The issue is politically sensitive to say the least. The skyrocketing prices of residential property in California means the earlier you purchased your home the greater your “Prop. 13 savings.” The artificially deflated property tax bills allow many working, middle class and even upper middle class families to pay their property tax bills and keep their homes. Businesses often complain that taxes and regulatory fees are too high in California, and an increase in either will drive them out.

A place to start may be a look at the distribution of state and federal funding. The system for collection and the redistribution of the tax dollars is complex, archaic and problematic. Residents and businesses will complain about increasing the amount of tax dollars collected, but if we are more strategic with the allocation of the funding, we may find some solutions. If we want real reform, there needs to be an in depth review, and possible modification to funding formulas.

The continued procrastination on these issues will affect all segments of the community including business. Business owners understand the need for a well-educated workforce. However, the problem that is quietly looming in the background is if the public education system continues to falter, businesses will be asked (or forced) to pour more money into improving the quality of the workforce “on the back end”, which is always more costly. It will take all of us working together to see that the economic health of our economies can rest squarely on the shoulders of public education.