

Opinion: Schools get big bucks, still behind

By Dan Walters

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Gov. Jerry Brown says that if his 2015-16 budget is adopted, California will be spending an average of \$13,462 on each of its 6 million K-12 students, or about \$81 billion.

The numbers most assuredly are wrong because they are calculated on assumptions of variable factors that cannot be precisely predicted and omit some factors altogether.

They don't include, for instance, \$2.4 billion the state spends each year to repay school construction bonds, or nearly another half-billion dollars it spends on teacher pensions.

The total, therefore, may be closer to \$84 billion from the state's general fund, local property taxes and federal funds, or about \$14,000 per pupil, and it could approach \$15,000 by 2016. Legislative budget analyst Mac Taylor believes that schools may receive another \$2 billion in the current fiscal year alone due to rising revenue.

Proposition 98, the constitutional provision governing school finance, requires that schools get virtually all revenue increases, and that's beginning to grate on advocates of health and welfare services and higher education who yearn to recoup what they lost during the Great Recession.

"It's great for education, not for other parts of the budget," Senate Budget Committee chairman Mark Leno said at a hearing last week, adding, "It all goes to (Proposition) 98."

Despite the surge of money, however, California's per-pupil education spending is still relatively low vis-à-vis other states.

Comparisons are tricky because there's no consensus on what to include in the calculations, and aggregate data are always a year or two out of date, which makes for a moving target.

We know that California's school spending has been on the rise, up roughly \$1,000 per kid in the last two years alone and at least \$3,000 each since Brown became governor again in 2011.

However, we also know that by all state-by-state comparisons, California ranks somewhere below the national average, and perhaps near the bottom if the state's high cost of living is included, as the National Education Association does.

By the Census Bureau's latest accounting, which is 2 years old, California was the 16th lowest in per-pupil spending, about \$1,500 below the national average, with some states spending as much as \$20,000 per pupil. But with the most recent increases, we may have moved a bit closer to the national average.

If the gap between California's spending and the national average is still \$1,500, it would cost about \$9 billion more per year to close it. To reach \$20,000 and join the spending leaders, the tab would be perhaps \$30 billion more, which would be the equivalent of a nearly 50 percent increase in income taxes, a 50-plus percent hike in property taxes or more than a doubling of sales taxes.

Tax hikes of those dimensions, even for something as popular as education, are, to say the least, unlikely.

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