

## Opinion: California's schools gain in financing

By Dan Walters

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One of the Capitol's perpetual debates is over how much California spends to educate its 6.2 million elementary and high school students, especially in relationship to other states.

Education groups, led by the influential California Teachers Association, have complained for years that the state is near the bottom in per-pupil spending, but with recent and sharp increases in spending, California has climbed rapidly in state-to-state comparisons.

A [new report](#) by the National Education Association, the national teachers union, shows that California is now 29th in per-pupil spending, just a few dollars under the national average.

When all forms of school spending – such as capital outlay and repaying school construction bonds – are included in the calculations, California's per-pupil spending hits the national average.

The NEA report estimates California's operational spending this year at \$69.4 billion and for all costs at \$84.3 billion. Those numbers translate into \$11,190 per student as measured by average daily attendance (ADA), \$850 under the national average of \$12,040, and \$13,500 for all spending, virtually identical to the national average.

Operational spending per ADA ranges from a high of \$30,738 in Vermont to a low of \$7,360 in Arizona.

California's 29th ranking is 13 places higher than it was in NEA's 2012-13 calculations, thanks to infusions of money from an improving economy and Proposition 30, a temporary increase in sales and income taxes that Gov. Jerry Brown sponsored and voters approved.

Moreover, with state revenues outpacing previous estimates during this fiscal year, California could easily rise in the national rankings because the state constitution requires virtually all of that new money to flow to schools.

At Brown's behest, the Legislature directed much of the new money into an overhaul of school finance that provides extra funds for educating poor and/or "English-learner" students.

The new numbers fuel two burgeoning debates – whether the temporary taxes should be extended, and whether schools should shoulder greater portions of ancillary costs, such as teacher pensions and school construction, that hitherto had been borne by the state.

The California Teachers Association and others are expected to place a tax measure on the 2016 ballot to stave off revenue declines from Proposition 30's phase-out. Brown has said he intended its increases to be temporary, but has been silent on whether he would oppose or support a tax extension measure whose chances of passage, a new poll shows, are iffy.

A plan to close a huge deficit in the State Teachers' Retirement System has been adopted, and it will phase in sharp increases in payments by school districts.

Brown also wants districts to stop depending on state bonds for construction, but education groups are pushing another state bond issue for the 2016 ballot.

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