Los Angeles Times

POLITICS

Newsletter: California’s sleeper political issue of the year, so far, is school funding

By JOHN MYERS SACRAMENTO BUREAU CHIEF
JAN. 27, 2020
5:45 AM

When divvying up state taxpayer dollars in Sacramento, lawmakers put the needs of some 9 million schoolchildren at the front of the line and give K-12 schools the biggest share. That’s exactly as Californians have said they want the system to work.

Voters rewrote the state Constitution in 1988 to focus the annual budget process on education and ensure funding grows over time. A collection of politically powerful groups, from teachers’ unions to school boards and parents, walks the hallways of the state Capitol every year to ensure those rules are followed.

But as 2020 begins, education funding is at a crossroads. And the political potency of “schools first” seems unclear in the coming elections.

THE ‘MORE IS LESS’ PARADOX

The budget proposal Gov. Gavin Newsom sent to lawmakers earlier this month calls for $84 billion in required K-12 funding for the coming year. (While other dollars are spent on schools, this is the key portion allotted under the rules of 1988’s Proposition 98.) A report out last week by the independent Legislative Analyst’s Office found that recent increases in school spending have outpaced the historical average.
Newsom’s budget boosts funding by $3.9 billion from last year. Slightly more than half that amount would be spent on one-time needs, with $900 million earmarked for training, recruiting and retaining school employees.

In most instances, education advocates praised the governor’s budget plan.

But as I first wrote last spring, a lot of schools don’t seem flush with cash — in fact, just the opposite. Many campuses have seen enrollment go down (and dollars follow students) and employee costs go up. Retirement obligations, from healthcare to pension promises, are squeezing operating budgets in some of California’s biggest school districts. The recent LAO report cited 30 districts, including large ones in Los Angeles, Oakland and Sacramento, as having “chronically distressed” finances.

“Despite California’s economy consistently expanding — now being ranked fifth-largest in the entire world — we have some of the most underfunded schools in the country,” E. Toby Boyd, president of the California Teachers Assn., said in a written statement about education funding after Newsom released his budget.

Here’s where the politics come in.

Schools are not top of mind for Californians right now. Education wasn’t one of the top five issues voters cited in a recent poll by the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California — a notable absence for an issue that’s historically been at or near the top of their worry list. (The current top concerns: homelessness, housing, jobs and the economy, the environment and immigration.)

And yet two big education funding proposals are on their way to the ballot. Voters in March will consider Proposition 13, a plan to borrow $15 billion for building and renovating education facilities, $9 billion of which would go to K-12 schools and $6 billion to college and university campuses. Since 2002, four statewide school bonds totaling $45 billion in borrowing have won — but then, voters cited education funding as a bigger problem prior to those elections.

Far more sweeping in its impact would be the likely November ballot measure to remove long-standing property tax restrictions on commercial properties.
Newsletter: California’s sleeper political issue of this year, so far, is school funding -LA Times

(Yes, this would revise the famous Prop. 13, thus providing some election-year confusion with the same-numbered school bond on the March 3 ballot.) That proposal could add more than $4 billion a year to current school funding levels, and powerful education groups are prepared to spend tens of millions of campaign dollars to pass it, undoubtedly to be matched by business interests.

The school bond, which has polled in positive territory so far, could offer a preview of the November property tax battle — and give an early look at how a campaign built around students’ unmet needs will fare when funding is already at historical highs and voters’ priorities are elsewhere.