Backers of the Schools and Communities First Ballot Initiative didn’t let a little thing like a global pandemic stop them from submitting 1.7 million signatures to the California Secretary of State to earn a spot on the November ballot. The measure needs 50%+1 vote to pass. California’s fiscal analyst estimates it would raise an estimated $8-$12.5 billion a year for education and public safety by changing the state constitution and raising property taxes on California’s largest businesses.

“Now more than ever, we need to support those heroes on the front lines who have been caring for the most vulnerable, educating our children, and keeping Californians safe,” said Alex Stack, communications director for the Schools & Communities First campaign, in a press statement.

Backers of the Schools and Communities First Ballot Initiative didn’t let a little thing like a global pandemic stop them from submitting 1.7 million signatures to the California Secretary of State to earn a spot on the November ballot.

To qualify for the fall ballot, Schools and Communities First would need nearly one million verified signatures (read: signatures of voters registered in California). Because of poor handwriting, error recording the signatures or people just putting bad information on the signature sheets, the state recommends gathering 20% more signatures than the minimum requirement.

Schools and Communities First went farther, gathering a record-making 1.7 million signatures – the vast majority of which were collected before COVID19 changed the way people live their lives.
If this news seems familiar, it’s because a similar measure has already qualified for the fall ballot. This replacement measure reduces the number of businesses that would be impacted, alleviating the concerns of some small business owners. According to Stack, once the signatures on the new measure are approved, the other measure will be removed from the ballot.

If passed, Schools and Communities First would raise money by repealing a portion of the iconic “Proposition 13”, a 1978 ballot initiative that changed how property taxes are collected and led to the slow steady retreat of California’s fiscal support for public education.

The landmark Proposition 13 initiative overhauled how the state taxes property, capping property tax increases at no more than 2% each year on homes, businesses and farmland. Properties were to be reassessed only when sold.

The new law has been great for long-time property owners, it has made it harder for governments to raise taxes.

But it is school districts that have paid the biggest price. When Proposition 13 was first passed, California’s public schools were a national model, bolstered by some of the most impressive per-student funding in the country. Today, the exact amount spent per student is somewhat in question, although the most common figure shows California now is 31st in the country on per-pupil spending.

The amendment would repeal a portion of what is known as Proposition 13, the landmark 1978 California ballot initiative that overhauled how the state taxes property. Since then, California has capped property tax increases at no more than 2% each year on homes, businesses and farmland. Properties can only be reassessed when they are sold.

The amendment would not apply to homes. The amendment would not apply to farmland and owners of commercial or industrial property with a combined value of $3 million or less.

Despite the support for this measure, it’s by no means a sure thing at the ballot box. This Spring (2020), a confusingly labeled Proposition 13 would have bonded incoming revenue to fix old and damaged schools across the state. The Measure failed to earn
50% of the vote, in part due to association with the unrelated, but identically numbered Proposition 13 of 1978. Supporters of Proposition 13 (1978) are vowing to fight the new Schools And Communities First measure as strongly as they can.

In an interview with a Bay Area CBS News station, Rob Lapsley, co-chair of ‘Californians to Save Prop 13 and Stop Higher Property Taxes’, focuses on “The public employee unions behind the largest property tax increase in state history [that] are willing to spend and do whatever it takes to raise the cost of living for working families.”

But apart from the fact that ‘public employee union members’ are California stakeholders, parents and taxpayers too, these 1.7 million signatures must come from more than “public employee unions”. The California Department of Education counts 316K teachers in the state during 1917/18. Interest in fair distribution of tax monies belongs to more than special interest groups; it is everyone’s interest. As the record-breaking number of signatures shows.

Damien Newton