

Dana Bunnett: Without more money, equal education is out of reach for California

By Dana Bunnett

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Once upon a time in California, we had high-quality public education that ranked among the best in the nation. That was when we not only cared about our public schools but we paid for them. I benefitted from that education in the '60s and '70s when we had art classes, music, sports and even vocational training. But today, according to the California Budget Project, we rank 46th in the nation in terms of per-student funding and 47th in education-spending as a percentage of personal income. After a decade of disinvestment and \$18 billion in accumulated cuts to school funding since 2009, our school finance system is woefully inadequate. It virtually abandons low-income students and English-language learners in districts with the lowest levels of funding.

If we want to be great again and fair to all students in California, we have to be willing to pay for good public schools.

In the governor's 2012 budget released this month, there is a glimmer of hope that a "weighted pupil funding formula" will begin to change the odds for disadvantaged children who attend low-revenue schools. But without more money, the governor's proposal leaves our school districts fighting for crumbs.

Consider the stark school-funding disparities in a region as affluent Santa Clara County. In 2010, Palo Alto Unified, the highest-funded unified school district here, had annual revenue of \$14,076 per student compared to the lowest-funded district, Milpitas Unified, with annual revenue of \$7,676 per student. Milpitas has three times as many low-income children and nearly twice as many English-language learners as Palo Alto. That means children with the greatest educational needs have the fewest school resources. So much for education being the "great equalizer" in California.

The governor's proposal attempts to level the playing field by giving additional funding to districts that have a higher percentage of disadvantaged students. And, in order to avoid a "Robin Hood" approach of taking money from well-funded districts to give to lower-funded districts, the governor proposes gradually phasing in the new funding structure over five years.

But we cannot wait five years to rectify the situation for the almost 118,000 children who attend the county's low-revenue schools. And how we can "level up" low-revenue schools in a way that's not at the expense of high-revenue schools without putting more money in the pot?

According to the Budget Project, California spends about \$3,000 less per student than the national average, and the state would need to increase education spending by \$17.3 billion to eliminate the disparity.

Our vision at Kids in Common is that all children should be safe, healthy, successful in learning and successful in life. Adequate and equitable school funding is one of the key elements to ensure that many more California students go on to college and become successful, working, taxpaying adults. A greater financial investment now will save us money in social costs in the future and change the odds for the most vulnerable children in the community.

I want our kids to have the same kind of excellent preparation that I had back in the Golden State's golden days for public schools. It's time for Californians to pony up and invest in a high-quality and equal education for all of the children who live here. They deserve it.

Dana Bunnett is director of Kids in Common (www.kidsincommon.org), a program of Planned Parenthood Mar Monte, which will host the Santa Clara County Children's Summit on Friday. She wrote this for this newspaper.