

The Parallel Worlds of Education

Can the Modern Classroom Survive the Age of Reform?



Students at work in classroom of old Calabasas school, probably in the early 40's.

Open Forum is a column dedicated to public commentary column and provides local residents an opportunity to express their viewpoint on issues of general interest. Opinions expressed in Open Forum do not necessarily reflect those of The Post. Submissions for Open Forum may be mailed to: Editor, Mid-County Post, 1840 41st Avenue, Suite 201, Capitola, CA 95010. Articles will not be returned unless you provide a self-addressed stamped envelope.

[Editor's Note: Diane Siri is Superintendent of the Santa Cruz County Office of Education and the county's elected Superintendent of Schools. Ms. Siri provided the information for the charts that are included with this article. The charts were produced by The Post.]

by Diane Siri

You look into their faces. Young girls and boys share in the experience of learning about humanity in a single room school house in a small rural town in the 1940s.

These pupils have lived most of their lives in the same place, shared cultural and ethnic ties to the community and need only a basic education to "make it" in their world dominated by manufacturing and agricultural markets.

There are not any computers in the room. They have not been invented. There are few signs of racial diversity. And, the hardened criminal carries a knife instead of a semi-automatic weapon.

It is a very different classroom than you might find in the modern world. Times have changed.

Among our modern maladies, the problems facing educators are proving to be among the most complicated and difficult to solve. Where once schools could "do it on their own," they are now finding that the skills of other agencies and service providers are essential to again create an environment where our children can learn and grow. However, at the center of the chaos facing educators is the discord between available funding and public expectation, a schism that will not easily be closed by simply finding ways to share library space or deliver health care services.

Put more simply, until we link expectations to available

resources few parents will be happy with public schools. Here's the dilemma.

We want the best for our kids. We want safe campuses, the latest technology in the classroom, competent and caring instructors teaching a handful of pupils, transportation for students to and from home, multi-cultural and equal learning environments and a curriculum that will individually challenge every child. But, we also want the best for less.

In California, despite the statistics that show our children are more ethnically diverse, more prone to be living in poverty and in need of a broader range of specialized services, we spend less per pupil than any industrialized state in the nation, more than 20 percent below the United States average. That is, we spend less per student per year than the national average by about \$1,000 per student per year (California Average: \$4,627 per student per year v. U.S. Average: \$5,616 per student per year).

When considering there are 5.7 million students enrolled in public schools in the state, the difference in funding is about \$5.7 billion.

Teachers are also paid more on

average in this state than in the nation (California Average: \$40,192/year v. U.S. Average: \$34,413/year), which means credentialed instructors must maintain classes for more students (California Average: 23.1 student per teacher v. U.S. Average: 17.3 students per teacher).

Are you starting to see the problem? Are you beginning to

feel the frustration? Are you ready for more?

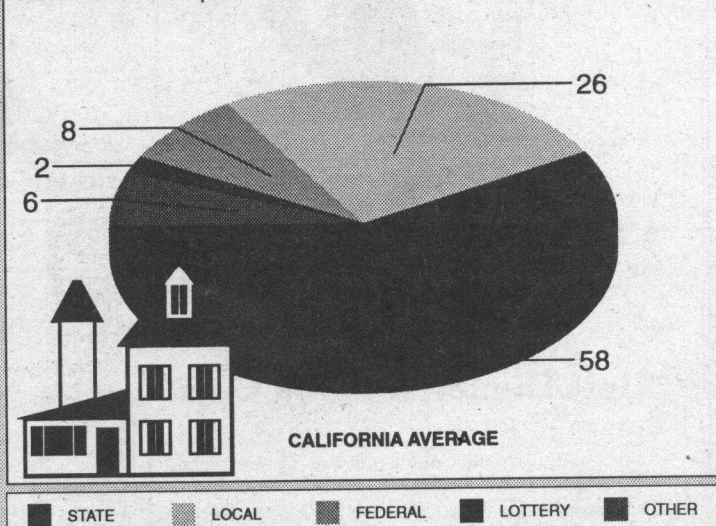
As teachers, administrators and elected leaders, we are perplexed at the growing number of issues.

Children comprise about 26 percent of the state's population, with approximately 17 percent of

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REVENUE SOURCES for California Schools

Source: California Department of Education



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kids living in families receiving public assistance. Nearly one of every three kindergartners entering school has a native language other than English and needs language support services.

Children with special needs comprise about 10 percent of the student population. There are needs that range from speech therapy and counseling (26 percent) to remedial instruction (42 percent) to individual day classes for the severely handicapped (30 percent) to funding for private institutionalization (2 percent). State leaders estimate that school districts spend about one-third of total school funding for kids with special education needs.

However, graham crackers and juice may not be the only traditional school fare that "regular" education students may miss.

Schools district leaders will be having to make additional cuts this year to make dollars extend even further than in past years.

While the costs of providing employee benefits, supplies and operational expenses continue to climb faster than the rate of inflation, school districts will not receive additional funding. Instead, in the best case the governor says he will pass along the same levels of support as were available in 1990.

This fourth consecutive year of financial drought in the state's public schools will probably produce increased tensions.

Teachers and school employees will be again asked to maintain their existing salaries or accept reductions in pay. District trustees again will be asked by parents to maintain or expand vital programs. Campus administrators again will be required to improve security and find money for additional special support programs. The emotions are running high.

These are emotions that will also likely erupt to make news, as educators and parents vie for precious and few resources. However, what may not make the headlines is the real story.

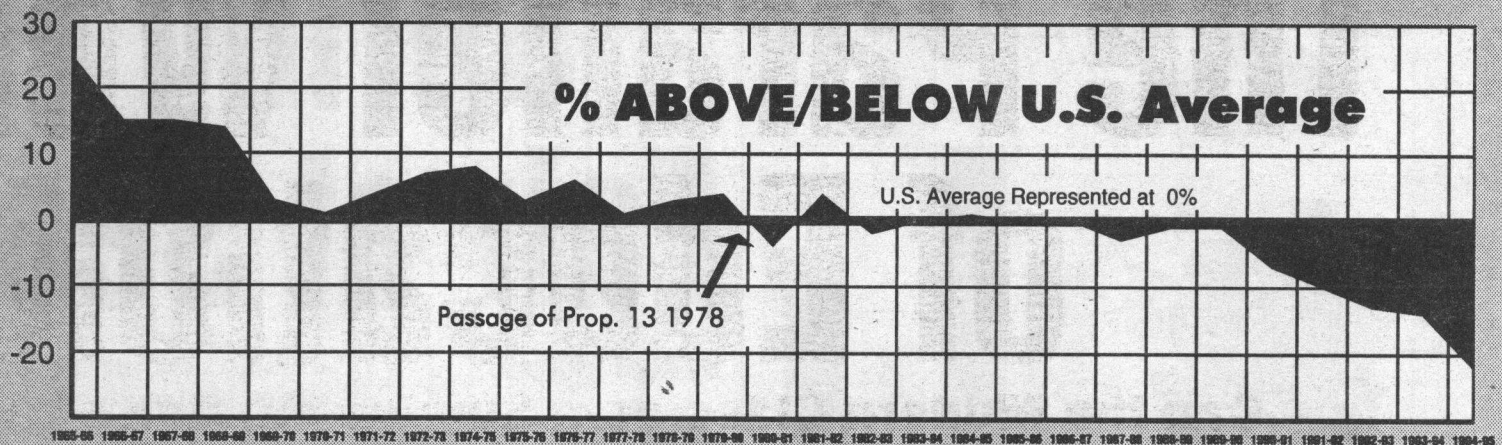
You now know it. Until we address the fundamental discrepancy in per pupil spending we won't keep up with others in other states. We won't have computers in every classroom. We won't reduce class sizes or improve facilities on campus. We won't satisfy parents or reliably provide superior opportunities for students.

I believe it is time we turn our attentions to the people who can provide answers.

I think it is time to tell our state

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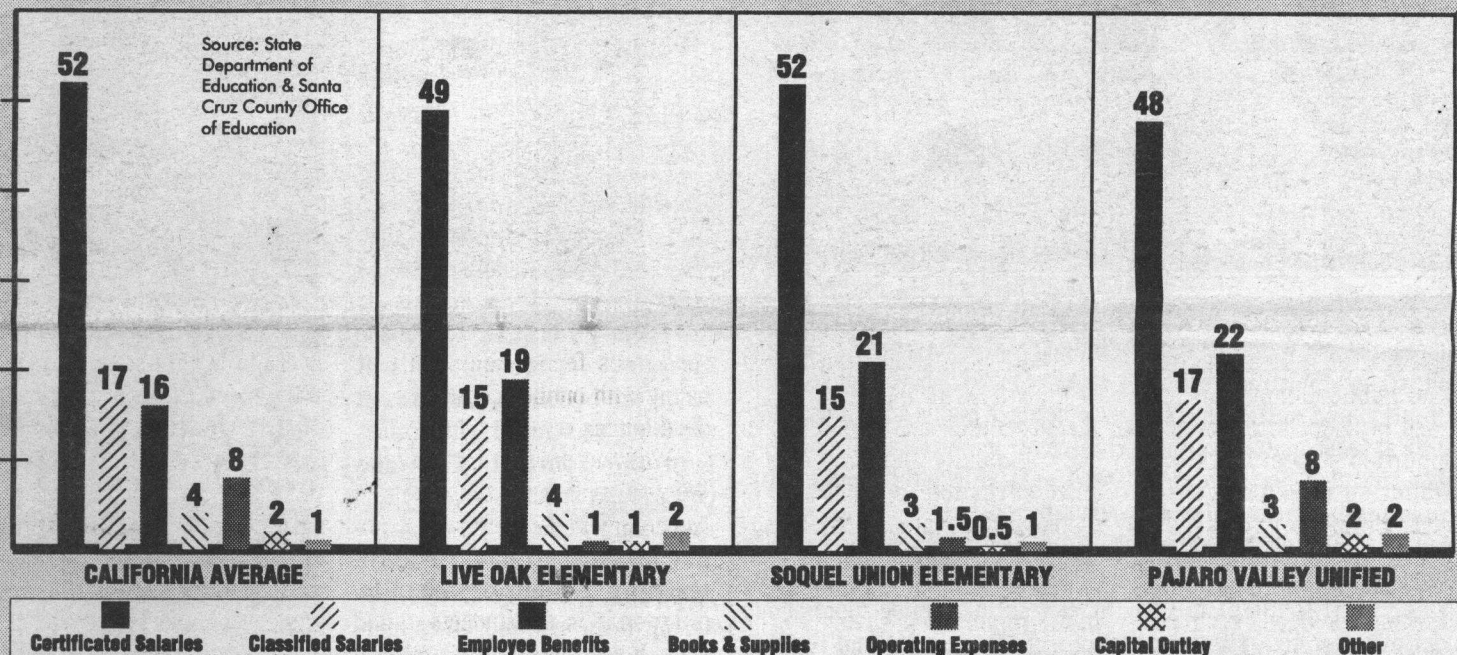
COMPARISON OF CALIFORNIA PER PUPIL SPENDING TO U.S. AVERAGE 1965-1995



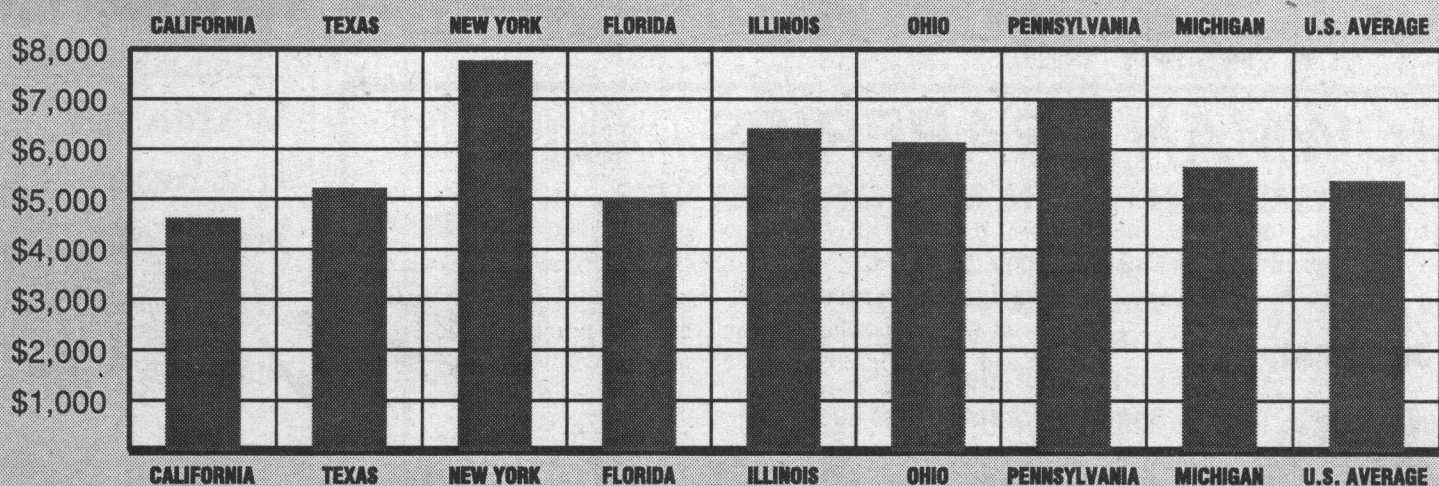
SOURCE: National Education Association. California is Shown As Percentage Above/Below U.S. Average.

PER PUPIL SPENDING/CALIFORNIA V. U.S. AVERAGE

PERCENTAGE SPENDING BY LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT



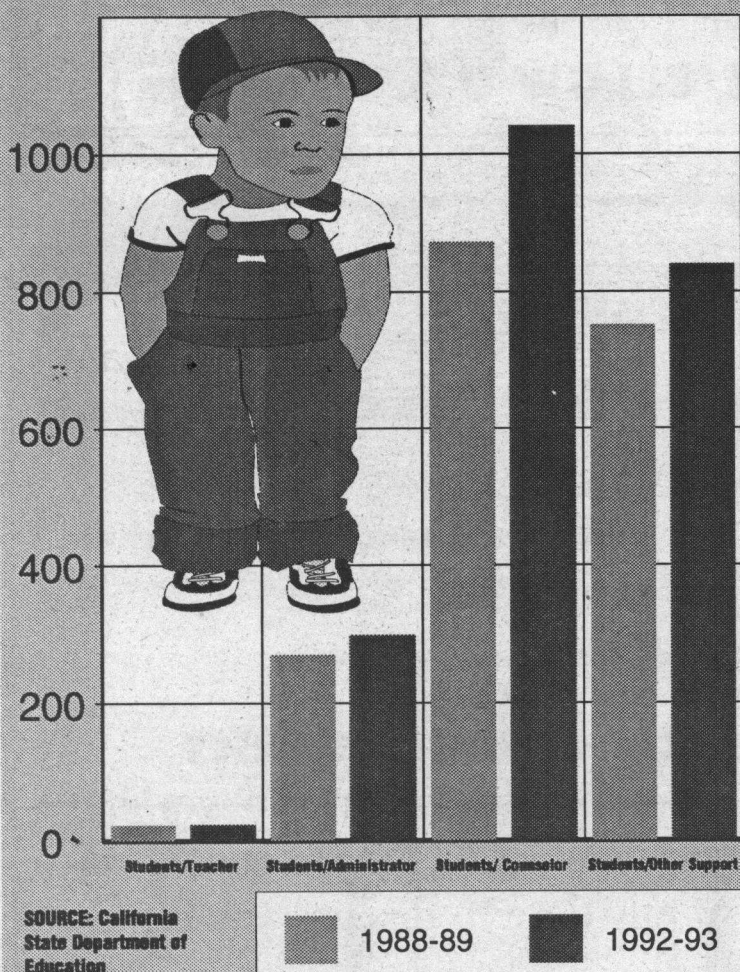
ESTIMATED CURRENT EXPENDITURES/PUPIL by STATE 1992-93



SOURCE: National Education Association

CURRENT EXPENDITURE/PUPIL IN ADA

Average Staffing/Student in California Schools



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legislators that we want our state-funded, state-controlled school system allocated sufficient revenues to at least match national averages, and that decision making responsibilities must be returned to locally elected school trustees.

I imagine it is also time to consider our own commitment to our schools, to show up and to set the priorities necessary to enable future generations of boys and girls the capacity to exceed our own accomplishments. And, I hope we won't give up hope.

In 1940, the reason we supported the concept and spirit of public

education was that we believed that every child should be given the chance to succeed. And, even if a half century may have past, the faces of the kids have changed, and the needs of pupils are dramatically different, that dedication to a free and available public education must prevail. □

[Author's Note: If you are interested in learning more about your public schools and participating in a dynamic group committed to improving local classrooms, please join us at the next Future of Education meeting scheduled for April 25 at 7 p.m. Call the County Office of Education at 479- 5220 for further details].

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