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From the Los Angeles Times

Year of Education, still

Budget cuts or not, a few inexpensive measures could vastly improve California's schools.

January 12, 2008

The year of education went flatter than a sheet of three-hole notebook paper in the few minutes it took Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to cover schools in his State of the State speech. But the budget crisis is no excuse for shrinking his once-grand plans to a couple of modest initiatives. Schwarzenegger has plenty of reasons to move forward now.

For starters, he has some good ideas already at his fingertips, courtesy of his own committee on education. Many of the best recommendations don't involve significant new money. Some do -- the schools do need more cash, struggling as they do with fewer teachers and counselors per student than the national average -- but those should be phased in slowly anyway. The schools will not be this short on money forever, even without big leaps in revenue. The school-age population is about to flatten and then decline; enrollment in Los Angeles' and many other public schools already is declining. That means more money available for each student.

Here's a strange-but-true anomaly of school reform: The wrong time to plan the expenditure of new funds is when the new funds suddenly appear. That's what former Gov. Pete Wilson did in the budget-boom days of 1996, imposing almost overnight a rigid program to reduce class size in primary grades to no more than 20 students. The well-intentioned bonus threw public schools into a state of massive disruption because not enough classrooms or qualified teachers were available. Eventually, funding shortages meant that schools raised class sizes in higher grades, sometimes up to 45 students. The program costs nearly \$1.7 billion a year, and there still is no conclusive evidence that the smaller classes have made a significant difference in student performance.

The time to imagine new programs is now, which also happens to be the right time to put other long-overdue reforms in place. Schwarzenegger mentioned one important change that he's ready to move on: getting proper data on how students, teachers and schools are doing year to year. Data collection is decidedly unsexy, but vital to figuring out dropout rates and giving educators, parents and the public meaningful information about progress. California, which has gotten bogged down in bureaucratic squabbling and budget delays, has been way behind other states on this. That has hurt it under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

But better data hardly count as the remaking of a failing school culture. Here are other steps the governor and Legislature could and should take, even in a Year of Budget Shortfall:

- * Put the education code on a diet. Establish a commission to streamline one of the fattest, most rigid and complicated documents in government, and with it eliminate central bureaucracy jobs that oversee each unnecessary regulation. The whole point of charter schools is that they're freed from many regulations so they can innovate, and then are held responsible for the outcome. Public schools must be run the same way -- including the accountability part. Those that fail should be broken up.
- * Allocate money fairly. California has an arcane, outdated, crazy method for funding school districts that began after Proposition 13 passed in 1978. Districts with the same needs get different amounts per student simply because that's how it was done 30 years ago. High school students in kindergarten-through-12th-grade districts get less money than those in high school-only districts. About 50 of the wealthiest areas of the state get more money than other districts, even though their students are less likely to need it. Significant money goes to meals programs in some districts, even though the funds no longer are used for meals, which are now a federal responsibility. Set one base sum for each student, depending on grade level. Then add to that sum based on rational special needs -- extra money for disadvantaged students, those still learning English, areas with high costs of living and rural districts where transportation costs can be prohibitive. This will be a tough fight, and the hard job of building political will and planning for fair funding should start now.
- * Let locals decide how to spend money. School districts have too little voice in spending education funds. A host of programs with specialized funding, from antismoking education to civics lessons, tie their hands. Taking the categorical shackles off schools would free up money at the time they most need it. The one to start with is class-size reduction in primary schools. Let school leaders decide whether students through third grade might not be just fine with 24 children in a class instead of 19 or 20, so they can spend the savings where their students need it.
- * Don't be afraid of merit pay. When Schwarzenegger brought up the idea three years ago, the powerful California Teachers Assn. practically took off his newbie political head. But many of the top voices in school reform have come to agree that paying teachers based on how good a job they do instead of on experience and advanced degrees -- two things found to have very little connection to teacher performance -- is a good way to improve student performance. Teachers are right to say that they should be "professionalized" -- accorded greater respect, responsibility and pay. One of the first big-ticket items California should plan for is giving teachers the kinds of wages and working conditions that will attract top-drawer college students -- those most likely to become excellent teachers. And Schwarzenegger should begin discussions with educators about fair ways to judge a teacher's merit. It must be based on more than test scores. The governor's commission recommends peer review -- teachers evaluating teachers. That's a good place to start.

These aren't new ideas. They are old ones that have been blocked for years, sometimes decades, by special interests and political intransigence. They keep coming up anyway, because without them, more money for schools won't make a difference. Real progress on the real causes of failure would make for a promising Year of Education, even without major new investments.