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What California's Schools Can Learn From Chicago's

By Steven Greenhut September 27th, 2012

It is hard for education reformers to be too optimistic about the post-strike prospects for Chicago schools. The resulting contract significantly boosts teacher pay in exchange for some modest changes such as a lengthened school day and improved teacher testing.

As school officials figure out how to pay for the new deal and bolster vastly underfunded teacher pensions, new disputes are likely to arise. At least officials in Chicago recognized that educational improvements require taking on unions and their counterproductive work rules.

By contrast, officials in California are still peddling the idea that the state's public-school system -- which receives 40 percent of the general-fund budget, by constitutional edict -- is struggling because it lacks money.

"We can't keep cutting our schools and still keep the economy strong for the next generation," Governor Jerry Brown wrote in support of Proposition 30, an initiative on the ballot in November that would impose higher income taxes on Californians who earn more than \$250,000 a year and raise sales taxes for everyone.

Brown's pitch is as cynical as it is untrue. The tax increase, which is favored in opinion polls, doesn't provide additional funds for schools. The governor and legislators passed a budget that increases spending for many other priorities, but cuts \$5.4 billion from public schools, unless voters approve the tax increase. So it is blackmail -- raise taxes or watch school programs get cut. Brown and his fellow Democrats didn't have to set up the budget this way.

Charters' Challenge

At the same time, the state's political establishment is trying to defeat Proposition 32, which strikes at the heart of the school problem by attacking the way unions, including the powerful California Teachers Association, are funded. That initiative, lagging in the polls after a labor-financed ad blitz, would stop automatic union-dues payroll deductions, which bankroll the political campaigns that make the union such a powerhouse.

But the real battle over education isn't being waged in Sacramento, but in poor and middle-class neighborhoods of Los Angeles, where desperate parents have increasingly turned to charter schools. Such schools, which are free of the union collective-bargaining constraints and many state regulations, have flourished by offering students educational choices and a model based on results.

As the Los Angeles Times reported in 2010, "Fueled by money and emboldened by clout from some of the city's most powerful figures, charter schools began a period of explosive growth that has challenged the status quo in the Los Angeles Unified School District."

The city, which has the second-largest U.S. school system after New York, has the highest number of charter schools in the nation. United Teachers Los Angeles fights the movement in any way it can, from rallies ("Hell, no, we're not fools, we don't want no charter schools" was one chant) to regulation efforts. A proposal to expand restrictions on charters and halt new approvals of such schools in the interim is up for a vote in October. If the union can't beat them, it is trying to organize them.

But it is unionization that is afflicting public schools, not lack of funds. At the state level, there is little debate over education policy beyond efforts to find additional tax revenue. Even reforms that should be noncontroversial have no hope of passing if the California Teachers Association opposes them.

Quashing Reform

A bill introduced in the state Legislature after the arrest of a Los Angeles elementary-school teacher on horrific molestation charges would have streamlined "the labyrinthine 'dismissal statutes' that require districts to navigate a seemingly endless maze of hearings and appeals," wrote Larry Sand in City Journal. But the union got the proposal quashed.

In 2009, the Los Angeles Times exposed how the school district places teachers accused of serious wrongdoing in "rubber rooms," where they collect millions of dollars in pay and benefits as the cases against them wend their way through the system. That is why the Los Angeles school district gave the teacher indicted for multiple sex crimes a \$40,000 severance package just to get rid of him.

It is impossible to run an efficient, productive and compassionate school system when miscreants and incompetents can't easily be fired; where seniority trumps teaching skill; and where city leaders, however reform-minded, have little authority over the classroom.

Yet all that Californians hear about from their state leaders are laments about a lack of money. "Spending on K-12 programs has decreased to \$7,530 per pupil in the current budget from a 2008-09 peak of \$8,414," reported the Sacramento Bee's Dan Walters. Yet a Pepperdine University study in 2010 found that K-12 per-pupil spending soared almost 26 percent in the five years before the peak.

These per-pupil spending numbers can be vastly understated, according to some researchers. Adam Schaeffer of the Cato Institute, for example, calculated that, when local and state bond

measures and capital expenses are included in the spending calculation, Los Angeles spent almost \$30,000 a student in the 2007-08 school year.

“More money -- they repeat that like it’s some kind of mantra,” said Lance Izumi, a California education scholar and member of the board of governors of the California community colleges. “There’s no correlation between higher spending and performance. If that were the case, the Washington, D.C., public schools would be the best ones in the nation.”

Administrators Galore

Meanwhile, the schools superintendent in Los Angeles, John Deasy, told a community group this month that the district is so financially pressed that it can’t cut its lawns because “we fired all the gardeners.” It is hard to feel too sorry for the district, given that the Pepperdine study found that while classroom funding fell, spending soared on the number and pay of administrators. This spike, while not necessarily the fault of the union, is another failure of a noncompetitive school system.

Will California voters buy into the poor-mouthing and hand over more cash? Or will they look closely at Los Angeles, where the only hope for change comes from competitive school alternatives, and at Chicago, where a Democratic mayor could finally draw a line with the teachers union?

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