

## Tax Marijuana to Pay for Teachers?

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by Neal McCluskey

On my way into work this morning, I heard a report on the radio about a proposal in California to tax [marijuana](#) in order to alleviate the state's [budget](#) meltdown. With the [money](#) the state could raise, said one supporter, California "could hire 20,000 teachers."

Now, I have nothing insightful to say about the likely revenue or anything along those lines that would come from taxation of wacky tabacky – it's not my issue. I can tell you, though, that the addiction that has largely brought California to its knees, ironically, is the very one that the would-be weed taxer in the story held up as a terrific target for resulting funds: state [education](#) spending, especially on teachers.

For starters, by [law](#) at least 40 percent of California's budget must be spent on education, and considering that most education spending goes to employee salaries, by default that makes teachers one of the biggest drains on state coffers. But that's just by default – as the quote above suggests, teachers themselves seem to have a powerful grip on the state and the minds of its people.

One bunch of teachers that almost literally has a kung-fu grip on the minds – or is it the throats? – of Californians is the [California Teachers Association](#), a 340,000-member behemoth of a teacher union, which really says something when you consider that teachers [unions](#) are themselves the behemoths of labor unions. Little gets done affecting education without the CTA's approval.

Then there is class-size reduction. Despite [dubious evidence](#) of the value of class-size reduction, in the mid-1990s – when the state felt flush with cash – California undertook a massive effort to bring K-3 class sizes down from an average of 29 students, to an average of 20. The undertaking required a leap from 62,226 K-3 teachers in the 1995-96 school year to 91,902 in 1998-99. According to the [2002 "capstone" report](#) from the CSR Research Consortium, it was an expensive effort that produced at best minor improvements. Despite costing a billion dollars or more each year of implementation, researchers could find "only limited evidence linking [test score] gains to CSR."

To be fair to the beleaguered Golden State, it's not the only place where politicians, and often the public, seem to be constantly jonesing for more teachers and education spending. As I have [laid out before](#), nationwide we have gone from 22.3 pupils per teacher in 1970 to 15.7 in 2005, and real per-pupil expenditures have more than doubled. Meanwhile, academic outcomes have been [pretty much flat](#).

What explains this slavish addiction? It's hard to say for sure, but it seems to come down to this: people feel that education is important; that the more teachers we have, the better; and that you can never spend too much on the [children](#). But it clearly isn't that simple. [Government failure](#) is very, *very* real – especially with a government monopoly as monstrous as public schooling – and sooner or later you have to pay the price for constantly doing the same crippling thing just to make yourself feel good.