



Vantage Point: State finances are in need of both immediate fixes and long-term reform

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Children in California are in jeopardy. Progress toward ensuring all children graduate ready for college or careers is at risk. Unemployment, under-employment and homelessness are affecting the home life of our students and employees. Our partners in cities, counties and nonprofit agencies are in financial trouble, and the services they provide to those most in need are being cut or eliminated.

The global recession hit California after years of an ongoing state budget crisis that has been papered over with sleight of hand and wishful thinking. Our state government leaders have allowed partisan concerns to prevent the thoughtful development of public policy that is necessary for permanent solutions.

The educational community must be very clear in its response: Our state cannot cut, borrow or flex its way out of this catastrophe. We must have resolution of the current crisis, reform of the state budget process and reform of school finance.

Immediate budget solutions must be sustainable, equitable and sufficient to meet schools' workload expenses over the next 18 months. CSBA supports a careful balance of cuts and revenues to meet these needs, but a simplistic, 50-50 solution will decimate school districts and county offices of education.

Our state must also begin now to reform our state budget process and produce the revenue needed to provide necessary services. The tangled mess of state tax code and voter-approved measures such as Propositions 13, 98 and 1A must be addressed. I am not an expert on state finance, but I am learning that all property is not treated equally under Proposition 13, that the personal income tax bracket for the top 10 percent of wage earners was higher under previous Republican governors, and that an increased sales tax disproportionately affects lower-income citizens. If term limits and the two-thirds majority requirement for revenue measures create a structure in which our elected representatives can't solve our budget problems, then these too must be on the table.

Lost in the years-long budget crisis has been any meaningful discussion of reforming our convoluted system of funding education. We have done the studies. Now is the time for open and honest deliberation about how to finance education.

What can school board members do? First, involve your wider community in the difficult budget discussions you're forced to have. In the process, your community will better understand education funding and will support the decisions you make.

Second, make certain the voice of education is heard, during both the current fiscal crisis and the coming discussions about state budget reform. CSBA is active throughout the state, and I encourage you to participate in CSBA-sponsored advocacy as well as your own local initiatives.

Our state officials hold us accountable for student success. We must make them just as accountable for providing the resources required to enable that success. Lurching from year to year while dragging partisan broadsheets behind us is no way to create public policy and no way to serve the citizens of our state.