

## Funding Schools Adequately: Is it Possible?



California is facing a dilemma. We have very high expectations for our students, yet very modest means. In fact, California's standards-based curricula and current testing through the Academic Performance Index (API) rank as one of the strictest accountability programs of any state across the country. A score of 800 on a school's API means that 70 percent of its students would exceed the national average, and a score of 800 for every school is the goal for the California state standards.

Yet the amount of money California is expending to meet these high standards is modest by any measure. According to figures from 2000 cited by Jon Sonstelie of the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), California's state and local government per-capita spending is 9 percent higher than the average of all other states. However, the K-12 share of spending is 11 percent lower. Teacher salaries in California are higher than in most other states. This may be related to the fact that the salaries of college graduates in California are about 14 percent higher on average than in other states; it would seem logical that college-educated teachers would also be paid more in order to be somewhat competitive. The high personnel costs have a direct correlation to a much higher ratio of children per staff member in our state.

Even given these caveats, however, it is interesting to note where California spends its resources compared to other states. Research by Sonstelie and others at PPIC shows that in all of the United States except for California, less money is spent per capita on such things as government administration, public safety, social services and higher education. In other states, more is spent on

K-12 education, transportation and interest on the general debt than is spent in California. Their report, *High Expectations, Modest Means: The Challenge Facing California's Public Schools*, is the first of a project examining links among school resources, costs, and student outcomes in California.

Those relationships are being scrutinized on a number of fronts. A lawsuit filed in 2000, *Williams v. State of California*, asserts that thousands of California students are "deprived of essential educational opportunities to learn" because their schools lack qualified teachers, instructional materials, and clean, safe facilities, and asks the courts to decide what kind of responsibility the state has to provide an adequate level of educational services. Similar questions are being asked in a number of states, either in their legislatures or through the courts. In California, a new Quality Education Commission is charged with determining the actual cost "to provide each student with an opportunity to meet the achievement levels specified by the legislature."

How should California address that cost? Even as state budget makers try to address the structural gap between revenues and expenditures, a solution for California's school financing needs to be found that will provide equity, adequacy and stability. This is a huge challenge. School districts do not have the local revenue authority or local property tax options available in other states. Should California's school financing structure be revamped to ensure that all students are provided with an equitable and adequate learning experience?