

California Budget and Education: Have We Reached the Tipping Point?

By Sophie Braccini



(left to right) Michelle Leighton, Miramonte High School Leg. Rep., Ana Ramirez, Camino Pablo School, Leg. Rep., Assembly Member Loni Hancock and Pamela West, Orinda School District Board Member
Photo Kasia Kessler, Las Lomas High Leg. Rep.



The logo of the flunk the budget campaign

What is Prop 98? Proposition 98 or the "Classroom Instructional Improvement and Accountability Act," is the basis for education funding in California. Voters approved the proposition in 1988. It was sponsored by the California Teachers Association and other education groups who sought to provide a stable base for education financing despite any fiscal difficulties the state might be experiencing. The proposition amended the California Constitution (Section 8 of Article XVI) by guaranteeing K-14 education (Kindergarten through Community College) a minimum amount of state and property tax revenue each year. The amount is based upon the fiscal health of the state's economy for a given year.

Ana Ramirez, Legislative Representative in the Moraga School District, got a bit more optimistic when she went to Sacramento on April 7th with three representatives of other school districts. "There was definitely a difference in the attitude of our representatives from what we saw back in February during our Advocacy Day trip," said Ramirez, "those who were totally blocked on the 'no new taxes' message altered their position and are bending toward some modifications. I believe that all have understood that education needs to be a priority."

By the same token, the Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD) had on its agenda on April 16th a discussion of budget priorities if additional funding becomes available. But this progress won't mean anything 'until the fat lady sings' and the budget is approved, so PTAs are asking parents to keep the pressure on.

Michelle Leighton, Kasia Kessler and Pamela West, from Orinda, had made appointments with our legislators to bring 14,000 letters signed by parents, urging them to support education.

Since the announcement of a 10% across the board cut by Governor Schwarzenegger to fix California's deficit, and threats against Prop. 98 (see sidebar), groups of parents all over the State have

mobilized to "Flunk the budget, not our children." The Las Trampas Creek board of PTA that covers Lamorinda and Walnut Creek first went to Sacramento in February and then again this April.

"Guy Houston is one of our targets," explains Ramirez "he is a Republican Representative from the San Ramon area who will run for the Board of Supervisors in the coming election; people want to know what he is standing for when it comes to education. Both Republicans and Democrats are willing to negotiate, look for new revenue options and close tax loop holes."

For example, Republican State Senator Jeff Denham may vote for raising revenues through sales of property owned by the State or reevaluating programs that are no longer needed. Such Republicans as Assembly members Marin Garrick or Senator Dick Ackerman are considering education as a priority and are keeping an opened mind, though no promises have been made.

In light of the progress that has been made in Sacramento, during its April 16th meeting the AUHSD discussed what to do if the budget situation improves. "One of our first priorities will be to re-instate some custodial positions," says Vice Superintendent Chris Learned, "otherwise classrooms

will be cleaned only every other night. We hope to keep one more person in our financial office as well." But right now the approach is "wait and see," hanging on the May revision of the budget.

"The final 2009 State Budget will take shape this summer," says Joy Zuber-Sumner, legislative representative for Walnut Heights Elementary, "we need to keep up communication with our parents, and pressure on the Legislature during this time."

The coming deadlines are: end of May, a revised version of the budget will be submitted, June/July and possibly August final approval of the budget. If a budget is not approved this summer, schools would have to borrow money to operate; the interest is an expense not many want to add.

To stay involved during the summer, sign up for the Get Smart Newsletter: http://www.lastrampaspta.org/getsmart_dec07.html. Consider participating in the coming event: Rally with Senator Tom Torlakson at Las Lomas High School in Walnut Creek, May 8th at 6:30 p.m.