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Opinion

## California is cutting education funding at its own peril

**The costs to the state in the long run will be much greater than the expense of supporting our schools now.**

By Saree Makdisi

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With California's budget now facing an \$11-billion shortfall, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed billions of dollars in spending cuts, most of them aimed at the state's already beleaguered schools, colleges and universities.

The governor's proposal is now on the table of the special legislative session that he called to address the budget crisis, so this is the time to draw a line to defend our public education system, before any further damage is added to the toll already taken by years of budget cuts on the educational -- and hence life -- prospects of a whole generation of Californian students.

Most of the prospective cuts -- more than \$2 billion -- would be to California's public elementary, middle and high schools, on top of the \$3-billion cut from K-12 funding in the current budget.

According to the Census Bureau, California is already spending far less than the national average for each of its students, and about half what states such as New York and New Jersey and even the District of Columbia spend per student.

There is nothing left to pare. "From Siskiyou County to San Diego, districts have spent reserves, reduced staff, eliminated transportation or increased class sizes over the past difficult year," warned Jack O'Connell, state superintendent of public instruction. "The governor's proposed additional \$2 billion in cuts to K-12 education would not only create catastrophic disruption in our schools and harm to our students in the middle of the school year, they would damage our future economy."

The governor is also proposing to slash \$330 million from community college budgets, \$66 million from the Cal State system and \$66 million from the University of California -- all, again, on top of cuts that have already been made. In schools and colleges alike, spending cuts have immediate implications for the classroom (fewer instructors, fewer classes, more students per instructor, etc.).

But universities don't just teach, they produce knowledge. In fact, what makes a great university great is that its students are taught by those engaged in state-of-the-art research. And cuts in spending on research can far outlast the transitory budget crises that produced them. A library that is forced to stop buying books may never recover, even if its budget is eventually restored. A lab that can't purchase needed equipment will fall behind. Faculty members whose research stalls can lose touch with their fields and spend years playing catch-up. Many will leave, and schools that develop reputations as underfunded second- and third-tier institutions will find it difficult to replace them. Merely restoring a budget sometime in the future will not instantly undo those kinds of losses.

We live in a global-knowledge economy in which California developed a leading role in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s precisely because of the strength of its education system. Cal State and UC produced many of the highly skilled professionals working in science, computing, gaming, animation, writing and film production that together drive the state's economy. To under-fund our educational system is to jeopardize our position in the global economy.

The problem is not simply a lack of money. We also have some of our spending priorities back to front. Even before the budget cuts, the state planned to spend \$5,900 a student in California's higher-education system this year (including community college students) but almost 10 times that amount (\$58,000) per inmate in our bloated prison system, which absorbs as much money from the state budget as Cal State and UC combined.

Not only can we afford to spend more on education, but we Californians have repeatedly shown our willingness to tax ourselves for public projects we believe in: Witness the recent votes in favor of Proposition 1A and Measure R to raise transportation funds, and the passage of all 23 school bond measures on the L.A. County ballot, including the \$7-billion Measure Q.

No one likes to pay higher taxes, of course, especially in difficult economic circumstances. And the current crisis will force us to make some tough choices. But if we choose not to collectively finance the state's education budget at the required levels, more of a burden will fall on individual students and their families, many of whom simply won't be able to afford it. Cal State and UC both warn of fee increases next year of up to 10% if state cuts go through, and they may also have to deny admission to thousands of qualified students. Community colleges may have to turn away more than 250,000 current students.

Not paying for the education system that made California an economic powerhouse is not an option: We can pay now, or we can pay much more later in lost opportunities carrying dollar price tags just as real as those of tax increases, not to mention the social cost of having a higher-education system beyond the reach of more and more Californians.

California has a \$2-trillion economy, the eighth-largest in the world, ahead of Canada, Russia, India

and Brazil, among others. Not only can we afford to offer our children a first-rate public education from kindergarten through college, but we are cheating them, and ourselves, if we don't.

But our ability to raise the necessary revenue is currently being blocked by conservatives in the state Legislature who have categorically refused to countenance new taxes -- and hence left the state no option but to cut. By starving our educational system of the funds it needs, they have chosen to protect the narrow interests of those who can afford to send their kids to private schools and universities, rather than the much broader public that voted them into office in the first place. That's a choice they may come to regret at election time.

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