

Sonoma County Taxpayers' Association
Position Paper
Public Schools and Education

Throughout America and in our local community public education is an entrenched concept. As Americans and as taxpayers we see the value that education makes to our society and to our standard of living. In short, successful education of our youth is essential to maintaining and improving all our lives.

The Sonoma County Taxpayers' Association (SCTA) believes both in the importance of achieving educational goals, but equally as much in the need for those governing our public educational institutions to utilize the financial resources taxpayers provide them both wisely and efficiently.

Achieving Educational Goals

Taxpayers have a strong vested interest in public schools achieving their goals to educate and prepare students to be knowledgeable and productive citizens. Our society and economy cannot thrive without our public schools meeting this challenge. Superior educational institutions will attract employers, who will in turn provide employment opportunities to graduates.

It's beyond the scope of our Association to micro manage education policy and practices, but there are several general guidelines we believe will help achieve the best results for taxpayers, society and our economy. They are:

- Education policy and practices are best determined at the local level. Different schools even within one community may face different challenges, due to demographic, economic or other variables. These challenges are best mounted when the educational leaders closest to the problems are in charge.
- In the commercial world, it's a well recognized truth that consumers are best served when they have choices and there is competition among product and service providers. We believe these concepts of choice and competition can also serve education as well. The emergence and growth of charter schools is one development that provides consumers/parents an element of choice and creates a sense of competition among to provide a good educational experience.
- Competition, choice and a high degree of local control must be linked with a robust system of accountability to achieve the best results. There is no substitute for measuring student achievement and growth over time, and holding those responsible for delivering educational service accountable. Neither students nor taxpayers should tolerate any educator or administrator who is not producing results in the classroom.

Whenever one entity spends the money of another to achieve a common goal, it's essential that the managers be accountable to those who they serve and those who fund the enterprise. In the instance of public education those served are the students directly, and the parents and community indirectly. The

taxpayers are the ones who provide the funds. It's essential that administrators and teachers of public educational institutions- be accountable to students, parents and taxpayers.

In recent years much has been made of the need for accountability to the extent that government regulators both at the state and federal levels have imposed guidelines, standards and other measures to try to improve accountability of schools. We do not favor any particular measurement technique over any other. What we do believe is there must be objective measurements made of students' achievement. Administrators and teachers must be held accountable for the achievement of their students.

Having stated our support for the need for accountability, we are inclined to think that injecting more competition in the choices for students and their parents may be a better path to the goal of accountability than heaping more and more government regulations on the backs of schools and administrators. Giving education consumers more choices and allowing them to make those choices will do more to force schools to be accountable than any amount of regulations and bureaucratic oversight.

We cannot complete this section of our report without mentioning the significant challenge Sonoma County schools face in educating a large portion of the student populations whose first language is not English. Allowing schools to address their own specific educational needs and challenges is consistent with the idea expressed in the preceding paragraph calling for choice to allow consumers to choose schools that satisfy their needs. English should be the required language taught for all students.

Maintenance of School Facilities

The taxpayers in Sonoma County, through the school districts, have a substantial investment in buildings and facilities. The Sonoma County Taxpayer's Association believes it is imperative that the trustees of each school district take active measures to insure that the taxpayer owned facilities are properly maintained. This includes making provision for replacing major building components that require periodic replacement like roofs, boilers, paving etc., without the need to raising taxes to make these replacements. It should be noted that a sale of bonds (i. e. borrowing money) to fund facilities maintenance of facilities requires raising taxes to repay the bonds/loans.

The History

Maintenance of school facilities seems to be an ongoing problem. Because few districts maintain and contribute to a reserve for replacements, when school districts need to replace things like roofs, often there are no funds available for that purpose. Either the maintenance is deferred and the roof leaks or the district asks taxpayers to cough up more money because the district failed to plan and reserve adequately. Neither deferred maintenance nor increased taxes are a desirable outcome.

Historically one source of financing for the maintenance of major building components, like roofs and driveways, etc. has been from State issued bonds. Individual school districts then must apply to gain

allocations for these bond funds. The problem with this source is that it is uncertain, and unreliable, aside from the fact that it's still borrowing albeit it at the State level.

The Case for a Replacement Reserve

Certain major building components, like roofs, do not have infinite lives. Their life span can be estimated, as can be replacements costs. These components are also characterized by the fact they require major expense to replace, and they must be replaced at wide time intervals. In other words, they are not things that require an outlay of funds each year, but at longer intervals, sometimes 5 to 40 years, in some cases.

Each year a student sits in a classroom with a dry head, they are benefiting from a non-leaky roof. That year's operating budget should allocate some amount to pay for that student's dry head. This would be in the form of an annual contribution to a replacement reserve. Without such a contribution, today's students are free loading on future generations of students who will be faced with either leaky roofs because funds were not set aside, with program cut backs to pay for replacing a roof, or with higher taxes.

Every condominium homeowner's association that holds commonly owned property sets up a reserve fund and homeowners make periodic contributions to this reserve so that adequate funds will be available to make the predictable replacements when they need to be made. In fact, California law requires such reserve funds, presumably because it's the only prudent way to manage such assets.

It's our view that school district trustees have a fiduciary duty to not only this year's students but also to the community and generations of future students. The best way to satisfy that fiduciary duty is to set up and make regular, periodic contributions from operating budgets, amounts to provide for those knowable and predictable future building maintenance needs.

Meeting Budgetary Challenges

Taxpayers also have an interest in public school officials accomplishing their educational goals while efficiently using the financial resources allocated to them. School boards and administrators must be held accountable for efficient and effective use of the financial resources entrusted to them.

Money may make many things easier, but spending more has proven not to be the panacea for underperforming school districts, nor an insurmountable obstacle for innovators pursuing productive policy and practices. Unfortunately what we too often see are school officials complaining about not enough funding, whether times are good or not. Schools face many of the same financial challenges faced by businesses, families and individuals. The financial resources are limited and those resources must be used in the most efficient manner to produce the greatest results.

It seems too often schools, when faced with a financial challenge seek refuge from taxpayers by raising taxes. We believe schools must first exhaust other solutions and that raising taxes should be the last resort.

Consistent with our position that local management is better is better than directives from Sacramento or Washington D. C., we do not propose to tell local districts how best to manage their financial resources. However there are some measures that we think may sense to some districts in Sonoma County and we encourage districts to consider. They include:

- Consolidation of Districts (See more complete discussion below.)
- Consolidation and closing of underutilized facilities – Only a couple of districts in the County have a growing student population. Those districts, especially larger districts, with a declining student population should move more aggressively to cut cost by consolidating facilities, and possibly to liquidate excess facilities assets for more productive uses.
- Consider larger class sizes led by top tier teachers – Smaller class sizes is the holy grail of the teachers union but there is scant evidence it actually produces better results. We'd welcome districts experimenting with larger class sizes, at least for some grades, and using the freed up cash to attract and retain truly top tier teaches.

Consolidation and Reorganization of School Districts

Sonoma County has 40 school districts, five of which have fewer than 100 students and the smallest has only 9 students. There are eight separate districts in the Petaluma area, a town of roughly 50,000 population. There is no logical explanation for 40 districts other than the emotional argument of local determination. We do not know or cannot recommend the optimum size to achieve the economies of scale that would serve the taxpayers', parents' and students' interest, but it seems equally clear that some form of consolidation is called for since the current system is not sustainable without increased costs to the taxpayer.

The Sonoma County Office of Education (SCOE) had a study performed in 2006 that looked at the possibility of consolidating several of the west county school districts. It found that several hundreds of thousand dollars a year could be saved by consolidating several of the districts and closing underutilized facilities. For the most part, these findings were rejected by the majority of the west county school districts, primarily due to the belief they would lose "local control".

The following are possible benefits of consolidation and reorganization:

- Administrative costs reduced .
- Purchasing power increased.
- Reduced costs of busing.
- Reduced cost of Special Education programs.

- Reduced cost of food programs
- More effective collective bargaining.
- Liquidate excess assets.
- Maintaining the best and brightest teachers.

With consolidation the schools in the County have the opportunity to maintain the services of top tier teachers. With excellent teachers class sizes in some grades could be larger thereby effecting some cost savings. Smaller class sizes is the holy grail of the teachers union, but there is very little evidence it actually produces better academic results.

School district consolidation and reorganization has its problems. The process is long and drawn out. Districts first have to decide to get together, then consolidation and reorganization has to be approved by voters in each district. It then goes to various County agencies for approval, then on to Sacramento. The entire process could take 8-to 10 years. The process is too long and cumbersome and should be streamlined.

A Word about the Role of Teachers' Unions

It's impossible to address issues related to public education without addressing the enormous impact of teachers' unions. One reason teachers' unions have become so powerful politically is because they cloak their support for their positions under the banner of concern for educating our children.

Several truths must be acknowledged. Foremost is the fact that the goals of the community and the objectives of the teachers' unions are not the same. We stated the goals of the community and students in our lead paragraph. The goals of the teachers' unions is to create more and better paying jobs for teachers and the protect teachers and their jobs.

We do not begrudge unions from pursuing their objectives. We do seek to point out that school administrators must be constantly alert to serving the community's and student's goals, and not those of the unions.

Specific examples of union policies that are in conflict with the best interests of students, parents and the community include:

- Resistance to charter schools
- Opposition to holding teachers accountable for students' achievement
- Policies to make it tough, if not impossible, to terminate underperforming teachers
- Resistance to consolidation of school districts

There could hardly be a better example of the divergence of goals than the protest by Petaluma teachers in October 2010. They were objecting to the schools, faced with severe budgets constraints resulting from the recession, from using parent volunteers to help with many tasks at the schools. What's most instructive in this instance is that the teachers showed no interest in the benefits to the students and their education. The teachers union placed the interest of the teachers above the primary objective of educating the students. As much as the teachers' unions attempt to portray themselves as the equivalent of motherhood and apple pie, they are a labor union only interested in serving their members.