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A Safety Net for Schools in Uncertain Times—An SSC Editorial

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The upcoming fiscal year, 2012-13, will mark the fifth year of sustained reductions in funding for public education. Overall, K-14 funding was cut by nearly 20% in 2008-09, and funding for education in California has remained at or below that level through the current Budget adoption for 2011-12. Given the constraints of already depleted existing school resources, we at School Services of California, Inc., think that it would be important for the Legislature and Governor Jerry Brown to commit to stable funding for education, which means an assurance of no further deferrals or cuts until such time that funding for public schools can begin to be restored.

The Department of Finance (DOF) will forecast revised revenues for 2011-12 as required by Assembly Bill (AB) 114 in mid-December. If the DOF forecast is disappointing, as was the recent revision provided by the Legislative Analyst's Office, then under current law, the "triggers" are likely to be pulled and another round of cuts made to public education. Should this occur, these reductions will compound what has been an ongoing dismal budget picture for school districts:

- In the 2011 May Revision, an additional \$6.6 billion was added to the revenue forecast; K-14 received none of this increase.
- In the June 2011 enacted Budget, an additional \$4 billion was added to the revenue forecast; again, K-14 received none of the increase, but AB 114 makes public education responsible for more than half of the resulting Budget cuts.
- As mentioned above, the cuts to education began in 2008-09, and have been in effect for four years; 2012-13 will mark the fifth year of cuts that continue to save the state more than \$9 billion per year, a total of roughly \$45 billion. No other segment of state spending has been cut so deeply, nor have the cuts been sustained so long.
- Education funding in California, on a per-student basis, is among the lowest in the nation as reported by Quality Counts and the National Education Association. We are in danger of severely handicapping our society and our workforce for decades to come.
- Another round of cuts to education, either for 2011-12 or 2012-13, will cause additional layoffs of teachers and other employees, as well as even deeper cuts to student programs.
- Finally, many school agencies throughout the state are very near the financial breaking point. They have eliminated programs and resorted to their reserves to survive the reductions to date. The funder of last resort for insolvent school districts is the state of California. State emergency loans and takeovers would likely be far more costly and long-lasting than stabilizing funding.

As is evident, even in these extremely distressing economic circumstances, education has more than contributed its fair share to resolving the State Budget crisis. As such, at a minimum we believe that education funding should be sustained at its current level versus being reduced or deferred any further, until it can be restored and increased. Further, we do not want to see the statutory trigger cuts for 2011-12 rolled into an education cut for 2012-13.

Given the importance of rebuilding the California economy, and the necessary role future generations of educated Californians will have, we ask that Governor Brown and all members of the Legislature, regardless of political persuasion, commit to no more cuts and no more deferrals of education funding until such time funding can be restored and increased.

We cannot have a vibrant future and match the success our state has enjoyed in the past without an educated population. We recognize there are significant funding challenges still in store for this great state; however, education has bellied up to the bar enough during this "Great Recession," and has paid its fair share. To ensure education retains its structure, a minimum funding level is essential, and the commitment described above is one way to ensure a stable, sustained level of resources during these hard times.

—SSC Staff

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