

OPINION

Books, budgets, ballots

One of the most important pieces of wisdom I have ever heard occurred shortly after the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest. Living there at the time and active in civic affairs, I ran from community meeting to community meeting hoping, like so many others, that we would find a

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quick fix to the problems that had triggered the riots. In the middle of one of these gatherings, in a room of leaders gripped by the urgency of the moment, one activist leaned back and proclaimed "There is an immediate need — to think long-term."

I'm reminded of that wisdom as we head into this electoral season. Filling the ballot are proposals that offer quick fixes to our state's problems: if only we could "live within our means," redraw political boundaries, and curtail the power of public unions, we would be over the worst of the fiscal problems that have gripped the state over the past half decade. If only it were so easy.

California has dug itself into a deep fiscal hole, partly through overspending during the boom of the 1990s, partly through the subsequent collapse in income and revenues and partly through bouts of "tax relief," including the permanent property-tax shortfall codified by another ballot-mandated budget measure, Proposition 13. The state's legislative analyst now predicts that we have structural or

built-in deficits that will hover between \$6 billion and \$10 billion of the next five years.

While some argue that we should focus exclusively on curtailing state spending, the facts are more complex. Steve Levy of the Center for the Continuing Study of the California Economy points out that California's tax burden is actually only slightly above the national average and the state actually ranks second in the nation for the fewest numbers of state employees per capita.

Where we rank close to the top is in terms of inequality: the Economic Policy Institute in Washington estimates that California is now the fourth most unequal state in the union when comparing the share of income received by the top fifth to the bottom fifth of households; and the third most unequal when comparing the richest fifth to the middle fifth. One of the chief factors behind the economic chasm is a struggling education system, with a recent study by the Rand Corporation placing California near the bottom of the states in terms of academic achievement.

Some rightly argue that you can't just toss money at the education problem, and school reforms, including innovative efforts at teacher training, family engagement and classroom instruction are certainly needed. But another adage rings true as well: you get what you pay for. When adjustments are made

for the state's higher cost of living, California ranks 44th in the country on spending per student, and we rank 39th when we compare spending as a share of our personal income.

Hasn't a previous ballot initiative already solved the problem? Proposition 98, passed in 1988, was supposed to use a complicated formula to guarantee that real spending would rise over time. But real spending per student has declined in bad economic years. And since other states are not standing still, even if Proposition 98 is fully followed over the next 10 years, California spending would close only two percentage points of our gap with the national average.

Moreover, independent analysis by both the state's legislative analyst and the California Budget Project predicts that Proposition 76, the "Live Within Our Means" initiative on the November ballot, is likely to yield reductions in the guaranteed base of education dollars voters approved in earlier elections. Is this really any way to run a state?

Education spending policy at the state level is not a distant abstraction. When local districts face enrollment shortfalls, as is the case in Santa Cruz, they are finding that external help is in short supply. And it's not abstract for the families hoping their children can get ahead or for the businesses relying on an educated workforce.

Looking long-term at the impacts

of budget decisions on educational achievement and equity is the focus of a seminar presented by UCSC's Center for Justice, Tolerance and Community from 4:30 to 6 p.m. on Tuesday at the Merrill College Cultural Center. Among the speakers, Jean Ross, founder of the California Budget Project, Richard Rayas, author of a path-breaking report on school overcrowding in minority communities, and John Rogers, a UCLA professor who works with engaging low-income and other parents in changing education policy. Providing a local perspective on these issues will be Diane Siri, Santa Cruz County Superintendent of Schools.

Of course, looking long-term will require more than money. We also need a narrative of common destinies and common hopes. The state's demographics may be rapidly changing, but the future is now: 64 percent of those under 18 years old are minority, while 62 percent of those over 40 years old are white. With the latter high-propensity voters and the former the future of the state, we need to connect disparate generations in a new social compact that can support education and restore California's promise.

Manuel Pastor is co-director of the Center for Justice, Tolerance and Community, a UCSC research center focused on issues of economic, environmental and educational justice.