

Opinion:

Dropout rate, budget crisis linked – and both can be fixed

By Alan Bonsteel, The Sacramento Bee, Sunday, Dec. 12, 2010

In 1999 Californians were shocked at the revelation that we were losing a third of our kids to dropping out of high school. That front-page news was made possible by our group, California Parents for Educational Choice, and the State Board of Education working together to get to the public at least partly accurate numbers about our dropout crisis. In 2004, the Harvard Integration project took that same data to the national level.

Dropout researchers have long known about middle school dropouts, but it was only last year's California Senate Bill 651 by Democratic Sens. Darrell Steinberg of Sacramento and Gloria Romero of Los Angeles that mandated disclosure of the existence of these especially tragic young dropouts. Despite the dismal economy, millions of dollars were appropriated for a new computer system to track enrollment and dropouts, and California looked as if it would be the first state in the nation to acknowledge these very young dropouts who so often lead ruined lives.

And what happened? After numerous lengthy delays, the California Department of Education on Tuesday announced that it had nothing to say this year about middle school dropouts, but maybe next year it would.

The Legislature and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger are now holed up trying to find solutions to our equally staggering \$25 billion state budget hole, a crisis highly unlikely to be solved prior to the arrival of the new Legislature and our new/old Gov. Jerry Brown in January.

Our lawmakers will quickly discover that the dropout and budget crises are intimately linked. Our deep recession was caused by the housing crisis rather than the dropout catastrophe, but the vast numbers of California teenagers and twenty-somethings who are dropouts and therefore almost unemployable have made it depressingly tough to pull out of our jobless slump.

And California is now spending as much on our prison system as the University of California and the California State University systems combined, with 85 percent of the incarcerated inmates high school dropouts. Almost every aspect of the budget – health care, law enforcement, welfare, unemployment benefits – is negatively affected by the dropout disaster.

Our short-term crisis is that lawmakers must find ways to deliver a much higher-quality K-12 education to our young people at a time when it will be very hard to keep spending at current levels, much less increase it.

And our long-term crisis is that our state's budget will remain wildly out of control until we get dropout rates down to the levels of Europe, Japan and China.

The solution to both of these challenges is school choice. Study after study has shown that when families can choose the best school for their children, dropout rates plummet. And, of course, it is only common sense that when people see value in a school, and make a commitment to it, the kids will be far more likely to walk across that stage and claim a diploma. Schools of choice, whether private schools or charters, offer a sense of community, of belonging, even of family, that gets our children safely to graduation day.

California's Legislature is now heavily Democratic, but charter schools, popularized by the film "Waiting for 'Superman,'" have gone mainstream. Prominent Democrats such as President Barack Obama, Gov.-elect Brown – who opened two charter schools in Oakland during his tenure as mayor there – and Sen. Dianne Feinstein have led the way and provided cover for Democratic lawmakers who are still on the fence.

California's current charter schools are easily outpacing our traditional public schools on less than 80 percent of their per student spending, and both of the voucher initiatives that were on our state ballots in 1993 and 2000 were for vouchers pegged at 50 percent of the per student spending in traditional public schools. The lure of dramatically better results for the same or even less cost is therefore obvious.

Vouchers for K-12 private schools may not yet be possible through the Legislature, but they quickly will be on the table, and in fact, we already have a higher-education voucher, Cal Grants. After the stunning nationwide election results, at least five states now will have governors and both houses of their legislatures very strongly supportive of school choice, and at least some of these states will pass sweeping and expansive new school choice laws that include private school vouchers within just months.

California is now in crisis like never before, but out of adversity comes opportunity. We need to do whatever it takes to turn today's tragedy into tomorrow's triumph, and to get all of our kids safely to the day when they can walk across that stage and claim a high school diploma.