

A disastrous master education plan

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By Lance T. Isumi

Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy

Given how many public-school students in California continue to struggle, the newly proposed state master plan for education was greatly anticipated. Unfortunately, while the master plan accurately recognizes many of the problems facing California's government-run schools, it has very significant flaws.

Issued in October by a joint legislative committee, the proposed master plan is supposed to provide a framework to guide state and local policymakers on education issues such as student performance, accountability and funding. But rather than offering an overarching blueprint, the plan reads more like a series of specific policy points – many wrongheaded. For example, the plan recommends that the state increase funding for infant and toddler services and provide funding for school-based health and social service centers. The plan acknowledges that these issues are not strictly educational. But with a public school system that's having trouble meeting its educational goals – and facing huge budget cuts – is it wise to ask that system to take on onerous non-educational responsibilities?

"It is counterproductive to add social and health obligations that may only serve to shift the focus of schools away from teaching the fundamentals of knowledge," said former Assemblyman George Runner, R-Lancaster, who served on the joint committee. "Schools are not one-stop social service centers, nor should they be," he said. "They should not be forced to address childhood factors that are the responsibility of parents or serve as de facto child-care providers."

The plan also recommends that the state fund a voluntary universal preschool program. This may be a warm and fuzzy idea, but test scores from Georgia – which enacted such a program in 1995 – show that enrolled children did no better in school than children in the general population. With a projected state deficit of \$34 billion, adding an expensive preschool program that may not work as promised at an estimated cost of \$2 billion a year isn't just dubious, it's irresponsible.

But that's in keeping with the rest of the master plan, which seems to ignore the state's dire fiscal condition. As Sen. Charles Poochigian, R-Fresno, notes, the document overwhelmingly focuses on the need for more money and resources and expanded programs. It would set up a California Quality Education Commission that would recommend "adequate" levels of state funding for public education. Since the new commission would have to implement the many costly goals of the master plan, it would

have to push for higher spending as priority No. 1 from Day One. Runner observes that it would be easy for the proposed commission "to throw money at problems and hope that things improve." Instead, he argues, "There needs to be a clear, demonstrable link between funding increases and performance improvement, and a greater emphasis on results."

Besides recommending spending increases, the plan would give greater taxing power to school districts. Districts could band together to propose sales and other tax increases in countywide elections. Also, the plan envisions a state constitutional amendment to allow districts to increase property taxes beyond Prop. 13 limits. No wonder that Jon Coupal, head of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, says his organization will do whatever it takes to fight this proposal.

Tellingly, the plan omits any reference to school choice options. It doesn't tackle the ineffective training programs at state schools of education. It also fails to deal with crucial issues such as the protection of incompetent teachers, seniority-based teacher placement and intrusion into school board policymaking that result from union collective bargaining.

No one questions that California's public schools face many problems. But the proposed master plan, with its emphasis on spending and taxing over results and accountability, is an inferior prescription for our education future.