



Children's Advocacy Institute

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Capacity of Colleges is Getting Short Shrift: Jobs Now Require More than a High School Diploma, But We're Not Investing in Providing College Slots

by Robert C. Fellmeth

As classes start for California's community colleges and universities, the high school seniors of last June will find that higher education slots per eligible student are down 6% from nine years ago. Meanwhile, the Urban Institute reports a gross mismatch between jobs available (technical, professional) and the qualifications of welfare parents now required to work (high school education or less).

The children of today are not going to be on assembly lines. And it is not just factories; agriculture and the service sector are automating, too. More jobs need education beyond high school, but we're not providing it. Sociologists decry income inequality--worse than since the Depression. The Public Policy Institute of California reports that the difference higher education makes on income is growing markedly in the state, and the failure of the poor to get it accounts for an important part of the growing income disparity.

Not all future jobs will belong to the 'techno-geeks," but our employment niche in the 21st century world involves some higher education--vocational, community college and university--or youth employment prospects are dubious. Currently, only 8.1% of our high school seniors are able to choose expensive and limited private colleges. Public higher education is the key, but total available enrollment has not been expanding faster than population growth. In fact, we are now admitting fewer high school students into higher education than we did during 1990-91, denying them a shot at professional and technical skills.

California's children sense the urgency. We see 35% of them choosing high school course work leading to college, and among minorities the commitment is extraordinary: 55% are taking the SAT examination to get into college compared with 31% nationally. They know where the jobs are, and they are asking us to provide the conduit. We need vigorous and planned expansion at a rate of at least 200,000 additional slots per year.

Because this is a commitment that requires capital investment and new instructors, it should have begun well in advance of the need, which is already upon us. Instead of responsibly beginning this work, our governor and Legislature already have punted for 1999-2000, and will do so again unless we hold their feet to the fire. Even in the face of a \$4.3-billion unexpected budget surplus in May, the investment in our children was not made.

Gov. Gray Davis contends that the state should not spend one-time surpluses on continuing obligations, which he says "add to the base." These kids are our base. And why do we assume that revenues must be based on current taxes? The \$28 billion in annual California tax expenditures and loopholes is not sacrosanct. Why are they not "adding to the (obligation) base?"

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They continue unless terminated by two-thirds vote of the Legislature. And their proliferation over the last decade has shredded general-fund resources needed for investment in our children. A \$10-million tax credit here, a \$100-million one there, pretty soon, you're talking real money. According to the California Children's Budget 1999-2000--an analysis and recommended alternative budget by the Children's Advocacy Institute--if we spent the same percentage of our personal income on public spending for children as we did 20 years ago, we would be spending \$9,773 per child. Instead, we are spending \$5,307.

Where are our priorities? President Clinton's are to take the major new source of revenue for public investment (the projected \$1-trillion, 10-year budget surplus) and feed three priority accounts: Social Security, Medicare and private pension subsidies. Together, they receive 88% of the total. Unlike our predecessors, who invested heavily in all of us, we are investing in ourselves.

The governor's higher education priority initiatives are: assured UC admission for the top 4% of all high school graduates (with only minor UC enrollment growth) and reduced tuition for state college and university students, including graduate students. This means that Boalt Hall law students and UCSF medical students, already subsidized publicly at \$15,000 plus per year each, get a subsidy increase. These are not the highest priority needs. How about a budget augmentation consistent with the children's budget? And how about planning for next year and thereafter with our children and their future in mind?