



Children's Advocacy Institute

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California's shame

OUR SHRINKING INVESTMENT IN OUR CHILDREN

By Robert Fellmeth

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's budget deficit reduction plan won easy electoral approval. Foisting \$15 billion on future taxpayers rather than paying our own debts is apparently an easy sell. Unfortunately, that \$15 billion is actually on top of another \$10 billion pushed forward by the previous administration through unconstitutional loans and accounting tricks that Enron's accountants must admire.

The governor's "True Lies" title for one of his movies is more than an oxymoron – it is an apt descriptor for the classic "big lie" – an untruth told repeatedly enough to be accepted as truth. The governor's scriptwriters have written large the following: "We are already overtaxed, and we overspent over the last five years, and now must face fiscal discipline."

And it is now widely accepted as truth. But it is a lie. And with our deficit pushed forward to this degree, we now face perhaps a decade of public child disinvestment.

To learn the truth, one has but to review the governor's own budget data, revealing that in 1979, our parents spent 7.4 percent of their personal income on general fund spending – mostly for K-12 and higher education. And "percentage of personal income" committed is the correct indicator, not raw number trends that do not measure population and inflation.

The governor's proposed 2004-05 budget proposes to spend 6 percent of projected personal income for all general fund spending – and with a lower percentage of the general fund invested for children given the growth in corrections spending. He proposes to publicly invest in children \$17.7 billion less in today's dollars – than did the previous generation. The general fund percentage of personal income during what Schwarzenegger labels "irresponsible public spending years" track as follows from 2000-01 to the 2004-05 year: 7.1 percent, 6.8 percent, 6.7 percent, 6.5 percent, 6 percent.

There certainly has been fiscal irresponsibility, but it has come from tax reductions and special deductions or credits that have shredded our tax base. State taxes have been reduced over \$6 billion during the last eight years, in addition to over \$20 billion in state tax credits and deductions that now shred the tax base without examination. All of this is on top of property tax assessment discrimination in favor of older adults – freezing them at just above 1977 values and allowing them to pay consistently one-fifth to one-tenth the sums of young people trying, however improbably, to buy a home.

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The profound state reductions in child investment exclude the federal cuts approved by the Congress in 2001 and then more in 2003 that will relieve California adults of \$38 billion per annum in federal taxes over the next 10 years unless some are sunsetted.

The last eight years have witnessed unprecedented indulgence to older adults and their pensions and medicines and tax breaks and away from our children and their education. We are spending our treasury on ourselves as older adults – on tax cuts. We are transferring our wealth not to our children, but from them for ourselves, and as perhaps the "Worst Generation," breaking a chain long a part of the American ethic.

What is the consequence? We burden our young with our debt. We leave behind impoverished children substantially en masse – especially those who need help the most. We forsake basic medical care for 1 million of them. And perhaps most reprehensible, we underfund basic education.

According to Education Week, California now ranks 44th in regionally adjusted K-12 spending, proudly placed between Louisiana and Mississippi. And that figure relies on 2001 data, before the cuts of this year and as proposed. The ranking is very likely to be 50th by 2005 – dead last. Notwithstanding some class-size reduction during the Wilson administration, California now ranks 49th in the nation in the ratio of students per teacher, well below Louisiana and Mississippi.

Our higher education tuition will go up – apparently youth are the one acceptable group appropriate for assessment – while facing unprecedented debt for higher education and scholarship cuts. Higher education slots per 18 year olds are now declining; 11,300 kids who would have gotten in this year, won't next year.

As our politicians talk about retraining laid-off workers, we fail to provide our own children initial opportunity for employment in the international labor market.

The California electorate voted for a gubernatorial candidate running under the banner of "child advocate." As with the motto "No Child Left Behind," such a self-proclamation is not an exercise in Orwellian newspeak. Being true to such a label means saying "no", loud and clear, to the radical reflexive state haters in Sacramento – who seek to mindlessly "starve the beast" (government).

Over-reliance on the state is a legitimate fear of the Republican Party, and of the electorate. But a good part of that "beast" is the vehicle through which we invest in our children.

Catchy sound bites and macho poses work well for an action movie star. But children need the quiet strength of a real hero in Sacramento, a leader dedicated to them, one who demands sacrifices for their welfare, who faces down the political bullies unconcerned about the weak and the future, and who has the steadfast commitment "to provide" – these are the real marks of masculine courage.

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