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COMMENT

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Give us flexibility to run our schools

By Christopher J. Steinhauser

A popular song that's performed at kindergarten promotion ceremonies around this time of year is "What a Wonderful World," the tune made famous by Louis Armstrong. It's always moving to hear our children sing:

I hear babies cry.

I watch them grow.

They'll learn much more than I'll ever know.

And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.

There's irony in those lyrics this year as the worst state budget crisis since the Great Depression threatens to halt and reverse the nationally recognized improvement made here in California's third largest school district, the Long Beach Unified School District.

Until now, we've somehow continued to close gaps in the achievement of Long Beach youngsters. Even our schools that teach large numbers of disadvantaged students are outperforming schools in other districts whose students come from more affluent households. I am especially proud of that fact, because I truly believe that equal educational opportunity is the civil rights issue of our time.

However, I had no choice but to notify our employees this month that they may face reduced compensation next year. That's not an e-mail that our hard-working employees deserved to receive, but we've already cut \$24 million this year, and the outlook for next year is even grimmer. We have no choice but to keep all cost-saving options on the table.

A declaration of independence

Before some of you dismiss this commentary as that of another public school official trying to protect what's left of public education's share of the pie, hold on. I want something different. I want the same thing that California voters wanted when they resoundingly rejected all of those tax measures on our statewide ballot a few weeks ago.

The failure of those propositions was a statewide failure, not a local failure. I want Sacramento to give us the authority to run our school district the way people in Long Beach want it run, not the way people in our state

capital want it run. Give us complete flexibility as to how we spend the limited funding that we receive from the state.

Remove all of the strings and archaic regulations that force us to spend where we don't need to while depriving schools of local control that puts the well-being of children above all else. The alternative is to keep the same broken system, continue making huge and drastic cuts to schools, and destroy California's educational system as we know it.

Sacramento must give up control

Let's examine who has earned the right to determine how funding is spent in our local schools — Sacramento or Long Beach.

Sacramento has failed to balance California's budget, year after year, plunging America's most populous state into unprecedented debt that threatens the viability of the world's eighth largest economy. The state's funding for public schools ranks at the bottom of the barrel nationally, and its piecemeal approach to school reform has resulted in a bunch of well intentioned plans that miss the mark.

The Long Beach Unified School District, on the other hand, continues miraculously to balance its budget while cutting tens of millions of dollars, year after year. And if you think there's still fat to be trimmed, think again. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed further cuts that would take 65 percent of our funding for all transportation (regular and special education) — between \$6 million and \$8 million. Without that funding, thousands of our kids, most of them from low-income households, won't have a ride to school. That's just one recent example of the weekly doom-and-gloom proposals coming out of Sacramento.

Despite the cuts that we've already made, our school district continues to outperform others nationwide. Our students this year earned a record \$40 million in college scholarships — double what they earned just two years ago. We're again one of five finalists for the national \$1 million Broad Prize for Urban Education because our children are making greater progress than their counterparts throughout the country, and six of our high schools recently

were named among the top 6 percent in the United States by Newsweek.

I believe that unlike Sacramento, Long Beach and its locally elected Board of Education have earned the right to spend our education dollars where we see fit. We can no longer wait for Sacramento to fix the mess that it created in the first place. Time has run out. Sacramento has had its chance at the wheel. Now it's our turn to drive.

Our school district has submitted a common-sense proposal, in partnership with the Fresno Unified School District, to members of the state Legislature. We want the Legislature to give us — and other school districts that request it — the same funding flexibility that the state gives to its charter schools. Provide us with one big block grant based on Average Daily Attendance, remove the reins, and let us go to work.

Flexibility and accountability

Our Proposal for Complete Categorical Flexibility includes accountability measures to keep us focused on two critical areas that our state has lost sight of: educating kids while making ends meet. Our plan would let the state tie my personal performance evaluation to student achievement. That is how much faith I have in the job that we're doing in our local schools, and the even better job that we could do if only we had more freedom.

The Long Beach proposal also would require participating school districts to demonstrate significant progress based on state and federal measurements, prove fiscal solvency, and improve graduation and college-going rates.

Yes, these are tough times. So who among our legislators will rise to the occasion? Who will use this opportunity to do what is right for taxpayers and kids?

Someone must act soon, or the progress we've all worked so hard to achieve in Long Beach and other California schools will evaporate. The state's public schools will steadily decline, and our children's voices will ring hollow when they sing about this wonderful world.

We must not allow that to happen.

Christopher J. Steinhauser is Superintendent of Schools of the Long Beach Unified School District.