

The State Budget Impact on Adult Education

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Evidently, being 47th in the nation in per capital funding for education is taken as evidence that California's schools are over-funded. In February, Sacramento took the latest step in moving California toward Third World status, reducing funding for our schools, colleges, and universities.

For those who remember, the legislature passed a "get out of town" budget last August that was pronounced unbalanced even before it was signed by the governor. By early 2009, the projected structural deficit was estimated to exceed \$42 billion, and growing every day. Last month, the legislature finally passed a revised budget that more closely resembles voodoo economics than responsible stewardship, but has at least pushed the brink of disaster further into the future for us all. How did adult education fare?

Current Year Budget (FY 2008)

The current year's Adult Block Entitlement is cut 15.38% over the original 2008 budget. This fiscal year is already two-thirds completed, making it very difficult for many districts to balance their budget by June 30. Fortunately, DACE budgeted for less than its total entitlement for the present year, so this year's reductions are not overly disruptive in LAUSD.

Budget Year (FY 2009)

For next year, beginning July 1, the budget makes a further 4.46% cut, on top this year's 15.38% cut, for a total reduction of 19.84% over a year ago.

Tier Three "Flexibility" for the Adult Block Entitlement

Categorical funds are supplemental, meant to supplement base funding for schools. To insure that school districts would devote funds to specific priorities, such as instructional materials, school safety, or arts and music instruction, the legislature over the years passed legislation targeting specific programs, labeled "categorically funded" programs. To insure compliance with legislative intent, districts had to spend the categorical funds on their intended programs. Although the Adult Block Entitlement is the core funding source for adult education, rather than being supplemental, adult ed is nonetheless labeled a categorically funded program.

Now, to ameliorate the significant across-the-board cuts to K-12 education, most restrictions on categorically-funded programs have been waived. Districts have complete "flexibility" to use the funds from 43 categorical programs for any educational purpose, as determined by local school boards.

As to adult education, districts will receive their adult block entitlement money from the state whether or not they actually operate an adult education program. The requirement to report ADA to the state to receive adult ed funds is waived through FY 2012 - those funds can now be spent on for any educational purpose. ROC/P and CBET allocations are also included in Tier 3, meaning that districts have total flexibility to use the funds for any educational purpose the school board deems necessary.

Will LAUSD continue to operate an adult ed program?

Superintendent Cortines has stated that he does not intend to dismantle the adult ed program. However, he has stated that he intends to transfer an additional \$10 million to the district's General Fund, beyond the adult ed funds that the district has been taking for years.

What does the future of adult education in California look like?

It is likely that some small districts will eliminate their adult ed programs altogether. It is also likely that some districts facing extreme fiscal challenges will significantly curtail their adult ed programs.

The Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO), a well-respected non-partisan advisory function of the state legislature, released a budget analysis last month that addresses funding for adult ed programs ("Proposition 98 Educational Programs" [available on the UTLA Adult Ed website, www.aeutla.net]).

The LAO has determined that the 2.5% annual enrollment growth in the adult block entitlement is excessive, having grown at a rate faster than the growth of the state's adult population. The office calculates that, since the 1990s, the adult ed budget has grown some 25% larger than is justified. "As a result, many adult education providers cannot serve enough students to earn their full state entitlements, and those who can, often do so in part by offering enrichment classes." The LAO recommends that the legislature cut the state's adult block entitlement by 25% to adjust for this excess growth in the budget. The LAO believes that "This reduction would have virtually no impact on core adult education classes such as English as a second language and adult basic education." While the state's reduction of the adult block entitlement by 19.84% was driven more by politics than budgetary prudence, the LAO's report provides justification for the cuts that have been enacted.

As to the state's ROC/P programs, the report states that "Changing the timeframe for phasing out adult services could save the state roughly \$100 million... This would result in fewer adults being offered no-fee career technical education in 2009-10."

While the LAO's recommendations are only advisory to the legislature, they often form the basis for future legislative action. A recent "Labor Force Status" analysis of CASAS data by the Department of Education indicates that approximately one-third of the state's adult ed allocation, some \$250 million, is going to retirees and others not seeking work. Of those who indicated they were taking adult ed classes to get a job, only 12% actually did so.

A primary stated purpose for funding adult education by the state is to move students into more productive employment. The data currently available, taken together with the LAO's assessment of over-funding, does not give adult education supporters a strong basis from which to advocate for the program, let alone advocate for increased funding. Add to that a recent observation by an official in the Department of Education that the state's adult ed program lacks a clear mission and focus – it is apparent that something needs to change.

The above are assessments of the author, and do not represent official positions of either United Teachers Los Angeles or the Los Angeles Unified School District. March 4, 2009.