

# No time to waste

## *An educator's approach to State governance reform*

*By Sheila Jordan*

A new budget has been adopted by California legislators to make up for the \$26 billion budget gap. Their "solution" relies on accounting tricks and heavy borrowing from counties, and makes deep cuts to social services and education. Although it is heartening to know that the state has stopped issuing IOU's, the new budget is hardly a cause for celebration.

As Superintendent of Alameda County Schools, with responsibility for budget oversight of 18 school districts, I understand all too well the difficult process of budgeting. I know that challenging times call for difficult choices, but the staggering cuts to education are unacceptable.

Federal stimulus funds have temporarily blunted the impact of cuts for many; however, there is a prediction that half of all districts will be underwater in three years when stimulus funds run out.

The emerging truth is that the budget process is deeply flawed, or worse, broken.

Responses to this failure of state government include efforts by groups like the Bay Area Council calling for a Constitutional Convention to rewrite the State's charter. Efforts by BAC and other groups such as Repair California are encouraging, but we must provide immediate action while this lengthy debate takes shape.

Appropriate short-term solutions to stabilize the state budget and support adequate funding of education and public services include the following:

- The development of a system of county/regional taxes to support local services -- placing a portion of the growth of the region's tax base in a pool to allow all communities to capture the benefits;
- A requirement for the legislature to pass fiscally-sound multi-year budgets as is required by school districts; and
- A change to a majority vote required to pass the state budget and to raise local revenues.

Benefits of the strategy proposed above include:

- Tax dollars in the hands of local citizens. At a county or regional level, people are more willing to engage in the political process in support of their own communities. Also, equitable distribution of funds on the regional level provides more stable support for all children in all schools.

- Compensation for the volatile swings of the economy, providing for sensible, gradual budget growth. This means that when the economy is booming, we would save money for leaner times, such as now. School districts are required by law to reserve a percentage of their general funds for a rainy day--the state should do so as well.

- Temporary release from the two-thirds majority for passing a budget. In recent years, a militant minority consistently stalemates the budget process. The ensuing political gridlock creates a tremendous barrier for the efficient budget planning necessary for safe and effective schools.

Even in the current economic downturn, our state is rich in intellectual and financial capital -- but our current system renders the state ungovernable. This grim moment in our state's history holds significance in its potential to educate and engage our citizens for democratic action. Can we turn some of the work by Constitutional Convention advocates into a lesson in building and sustaining a democratic state, while meeting the needs of our vulnerable populations?

It is my hope that we can combine a healthy discussion to revise the Constitution while we address the suffering of millions of Californians in a more immediate and complementary way. Let us not lose this learning opportunity. There is no time to waste.

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**"Our current system  
renders the state  
ungovernable."**

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