



*California State Parent Teacher Association (PTA)*  
Public Education Policy Brief

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Parents' priorities for school finance and education reform

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## *Problem statement*

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Education is consistently identified as the number one priority by the voters of California, and indeed the nation. It is the one priority that crosses political affiliations. And yet, we find that our state's education system is not adequate to prepare all of our children to take on the challenges of a new century and a global economy. Thus, the ability to improve the educational outcomes for California's youth relies on our collective intent to translate this priority into greater investment in the public school system.

## *Policy issues and recommendations*

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California State PTA includes nearly one-million members statewide, with approximately 3700 local PTA associations, 170 PTA councils, and 29 regional district PTAs. As such, the organization is uniquely positioned to offer policy recommendations based on the experience and perspectives of local volunteer parents whose children, grandchildren and communities are served by the public school system. The following recommendations emerged from survey research and focus groups conducted among California parents and PTA members in 2006-07, as well as formal resolutions and position statements approved by California State PTA delegates and commissions.

In general, as the state considers any systemic public education reforms, we recommend strongly that:

- California's public education system must be focused on student needs, rather than being "compliance-driven."
- The definition of a quality education must include breadth and depth far beyond the 3 "R's." The end goal of our system must be to develop students with lifelong learning and career skills – critical and creative thinkers who are able to contribute to society and fulfill their own potential, based on a well rounded, interdisciplinary curriculum of arts, sciences, literature, technology, physical, cultural and vocational education.
- Quality education must be individualized. The system must respond to how individual children learn, and what is developmentally appropriate for their physical, emotional, intellectual and vocational needs. There must be multiple ways to assess and evaluate student progress, and flexibility to support different needs. One size does not fit all.
- Equity and equal access are paramount. Across schools and communities throughout the state, every child must have access to quality programs and services.
- Any reforms must be funded at levels that ensure successful implementation. Once implemented and funded, reform efforts must be given a chance to work.

We have divided our recommendations into several key categories:

### Funding

- More resources are needed for virtually every aspect of education, from materials, textbooks, and supplies to technology, libraries and facilities; plus expanded and enhanced human resources via trained professionals in all academic curriculum areas, arts education, physical education, nutrition, health and counseling services.
- We must increase the overall per-pupil allocation of funding to provide the staff, support services and other resources needed to improve outcomes for all children.
- All funding must be used effectively and efficiently.
- The state budget process must be stable and allow for adequate resources and planning at the local level.
- The school finance system at all levels must be easier to understand, so that it helps strengthen confidence in, and support for, public education.
- The school finance system must account for differences in the needs of children and local communities.

### High Quality Staff

- Quality education depends above all on quality staff. California's efforts to raise student achievement and reduce the achievement gap require additional investments in training and support for new and experienced teachers, as well as leadership development for administrators.
- Teachers must be expertly trained in interdisciplinary approaches; they must be able to deliver curriculum and assessments in multiple ways. As individuals, they must be culturally competent, emotionally invested, and committed to lifelong learning.
- Leadership development must include training in the evaluation and coaching of staff.
- Additional investments must be made to raise staffing levels of school support personnel in order to help improve student outcomes.
- More flexibility in the compensation of staff should be considered.

### Parent and Community Engagement

- Strengthening the connection between families and schools must be a priority, including programs that assist parents in better understanding their role in the educational success of their children.
- Staff development at all levels must include strategies to increase parental and community engagement and to promote home-school connections.
- Laws and regulations should be reviewed and revised as appropriate to allow maximum collaboration between local agencies and entities that deliver programs and services for children and families.
- Schools should be centers of the community. Partnerships must be forged with parents, the business community, youth groups, social services – everyone with a vested interest in the community. There should be open communication and a sense of ownership by all members of the community.

## Governance

- Decision-making authority must be moved closer to the district and/or school site.
- The state should establish standards and maintain and support the state accountability program. Accountability must include multiple measures and be focused on student learning; it must be fair, not punitive.
- Whenever it is in the best interests of children and families, local schools and locally elected school boards that are accountable to the local communities who elect them, must have maximum ability to set policies and make decisions to ensure all students meet the standards.

## Facilities

- Quality environment, facilities and material resources are essential. Learning environments must be clean, safe and configured to promote multiple ways of learning. All teachers and students must have the materials and resources they need. Class sizes must be reduced across all grade levels.

## Data

- School and state data systems must be accessible, comprehensive and understandable, so as to enhance the ability at the local and state levels to evaluate programs and make informed decisions about reforms.
- Student performance must be measured across time.
- Assessments must be accurate, timely and student-focused. They must be recognized primarily as a means of improving classroom instruction so all students can succeed, not as a scorecard for evaluating schools.

## *Summary of research methodology*

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The recommendations contained in this brief are based on surveys and focus groups conducted by the California State PTA as part of a school finance partnership project launched in 2006. California State PTA joined with the League of Women Voters of California Education Fund, California School Boards Association and Children Now in this project, which is funded by the Hewlett Foundation. Between January 2006 and May 2007, California State PTA undertook to gain a detailed understanding of how its membership views the public policy issues surrounding school funding and comprehensive public education reform. To achieve this understanding, a research consultant group, Creative Qualitative, was selected to work with members to develop a clear internal assessment. The Creative Qualitative (CQ) consultant team consisted of Nancy Schmidt and Terry Ogawa. Research was conducted in several phases:

### **Phase I: State Board of Managers**

#### **January, 2006 – Riverside, California**

10 discussion/brainstorming groups were conducted with the different PTA commissions, to define quality education and address five core questions:

- What is the definition of “high-quality education?”
- What resources are needed to support high quality education?
- What types of accountability and reform measures need to take place to support high quality education?
- How should quality education be funded?
- How can broad support for quality education be built throughout the state?

### **Phase II: State Legislative Conference**

#### **March, 2006 – Sacramento, California**

6 brainstorming groups responded to core questions about funding, accountability and reform

- *Funding:*
  - a) What funding systems do we currently have in place that may serve as a potential opportunity to increase funding for education?
  - b) Of these, which are most appropriate for this purpose?
  - c) Do you believe that PTA would support this recommendation?
- *Accountability and reform of student achievement*
  - a) What measures currently exist?
  - b) What do they measure?
  - c) How effective do you think they are?

### **Phase III: State Convention**

#### **May, 2006 – Anaheim, California**

A tutorial session on the school finance system was conducted in coordination with Ed Source, followed by break-out groups. Brainstorming groups addressed funding and accountability priorities with the following question:

- “What are the top 3-5 priorities the PTA should focus on in the next 2-3 years in the areas of funding and reform, to ensure that all children receive a high quality education?”

Each of these activities was iterative – that is, each built on the findings of the previous research, and was aimed at moving the discussion forward. The qualitative research also formed the basis for a quantitative survey conducted in September, 2006.

### **Phase IV: Online membership survey**

#### **September, 2006 – statewide**

An online survey of California State PTA members was conducted during the month of September, 2006, through the organization’s website. A call to participate was sent to members via personal emails to each District president from the State leadership; invitations were also sent through all available email lists, including the legislative committee list and lists compiled at the State Convention. Multiple follow-up emails and personal phone calls from the State PTA leadership were also made to encourage participation. A total of 1336 responses were received for the survey, 90% of whom described themselves as currently active members.

***Phase V: State convention survey***

***May, 2007 – Sacramento***

A follow-up survey was conducted with 245 participants; topics focused on three core questions related to school funding and reform. A California State PTA task force also reviewed the association's existing resolutions and position statements related to school finance and reform.