

School funds not divided equally

'Low-wealth' districts get less than their fair share of state money

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Alex Landau sits with 26 seventh-graders at Orinda Intermediate School in Contra Costa. That's luxuriously small compared to a typical class brimming with 32 middle-schoolers.

Sometimes Alex swings by the library or heads to the Bulldog Kennel cafe for chili and rice. He fills in as a teaching assistant rather than taking music or art.

"It's a great school," he said.

Little does Alex know that schools in the Orinda Union School District would not have a cafeteria if parents did not pay for and run it themselves. Orinda's working parents spend countless hours running bake sales, auctions and parcel tax campaigns to pay for basic art programs, small classes and librarians.

"The reason people raise so much money is because we get so little from the state," said Linda Landau, Alex's mother and a school board member. "Our parent clubs put over \$1 million into schools each year. It's scary."

The state gives Orinda so little money that it, like hundreds of others that get less than the state average, is called a "low-wealth" district.

At the neighboring Knightsen School District, students also have a librarian and a cafeteria and an arts program — but the state pays for theirs. Knightsen's property taxes are lower than Orinda's, so the state gives it more money for schools. Here are the latest available figures:

In 1999-2000, Knightsen produced \$1,911 per pupil locally. The state supplied \$2,300 for a total of \$4,211.

Orinda produced \$2,348 per pupil locally. The state contributed \$1,412, for a total of \$3,760.

Under that formula, Orinda got \$451 less per pupil than did Knightsen, or \$1.1 million — enough to pay for 30 teachers.

The below-average funding is "not acceptable," said Jerry Bucci, business director for the district. "The state should provide funding in an equitable fashion."

But whenever the state tries to bring districts up to the statewide average, an interesting thing happens: The average rises.

"It's the dog chasing its tail," said Paul Goldfinger, vice president of School Services of California, a finance consulting firm. "You never get there."

A bipartisan bill by Republican

Assemblywoman Lynn Leach of Walnut Creek and Assemblywoman Helen Thomas, D-Davis, would spend about \$400 million over the next two years to bring all districts up to the funding level that 90 percent of students have now.

Paula Goodwin of Orinda likes that idea.

"The state has no idea what's going on here," said Goodwin, a lawyer who has run two successful parcel tax campaigns and heads a school fund-raising group.

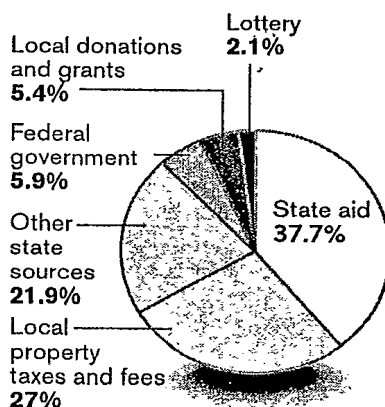
"I feel somewhat abandoned. They visualize us as a well-to-do community. They're forcing us to have to function in this way. One legislative bill could equal 10 auctions that we put on."

— Nanette Asimov

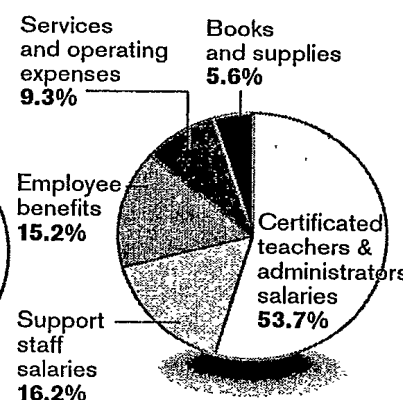
Money in, money out

Here is a budget breakdown for the average California public school — what it gets, and how it spends the money. Figures are for 1999-2000, the most recent fiscal year available.

State's average school revenue



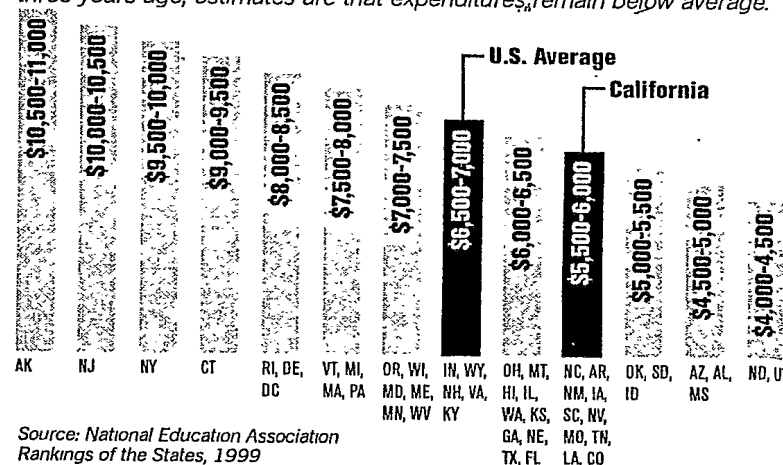
State's average school expenditures



Sources: California Department of Education and Ed-Data

How California stacks up

California ranks 40th in spending per pupil, according to the National Education Association's most recent figures (1997-'93). The data lag because the NEA looks at dollars actually spent — not budgeted — in a given year. Although California spends more in 2000-01 than it did three years ago, estimates are that expenditures remain below average.



Source: National Education Association Rankings of the States, 1999