



Follow the money

Is landmark school funding law helping poor students?

BY JOHN FENSTERWALD / EdSource

In its first detailed examination of former Gov. Jerry Brown's landmark school funding law, the California state auditor sharply criticized the Legislature and State Board of Education for failing to ensure that billions of dollars have been spent on low-income children and other students targeted for additional state money.

"In general, we determined that the State's approach" to the Local Control Funding Formula "has not ensured that funding is benefiting students as intended," State Auditor Elaine Howle wrote in a letter with the audit, released on Nov. 5.

Howle issued her findings after examining spending by three districts since the funding formula went into effect six years ago: Oakland, San Diego and Clovis. Her report's recommendations call for tightening rules for spending money explicitly allocated for low-income children, foster youths and English learners—the students targeted under the formula—and for making it easier for the state and the public to track spending within and across districts.

Gov. Brown had opposed some of those changes and sidetracked legislation that would have imposed what Howle wants: uniform spending codes to give lawmakers information they need to see if the law is working adequately. The audit may encourage legislators including Assemblywoman Shirley Weber, D-San Diego, who pushed for Howle's report, to reintroduce a bill for tighter controls.

Howle's conclusion vindicates complaints and lawsuits brought by Public Advocates and the ACLU of California and affirms longtime criticisms of student advocacy organizations such as Education Trust-West and Children Now that spending for high-needs students often isn't monitored. A recent report by the Public Policy Institute of California found that statewide, "supplemental and concentration" dollars generally were being spent on targeted groups but it took an enterprising researcher exhaustive digging to determine that.

In a statement, Bill Lucia, president of the nonprofit organization EdVoice, said Howle's report "should be a wakeup call to all the politicians in Sacramento who say they care about closing achievement gaps. This audit uncovered serious control deficiencies lawmakers need to address immediately."

A student at Redwood Heights Elementary in Oakland does a math problem in 2014.

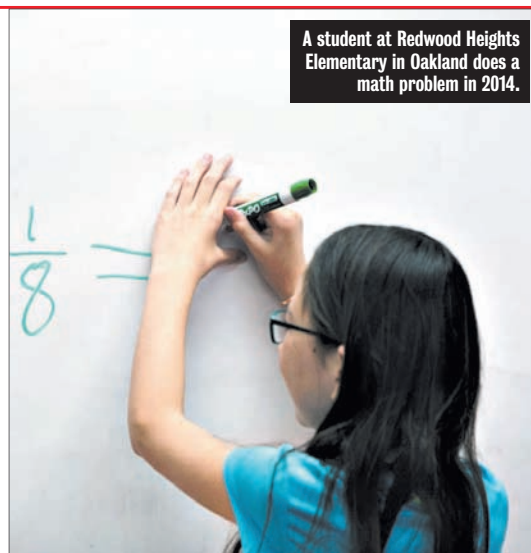


PHOTO BY ALISON YIN FOR EDSource

The 2013 funding formula eliminated dozens of highly restrictive "categorical" funds and instead gave districts more flexibility and authority to decide how to spend money. The formula awards additional funding based on the proportions of "high-needs" students. Districts are to be held accountable for showing progress on multiple measures on the California School Dashboard and to lay out improvement plans in a three-year Local Control and Accountability Plan, or LCAP.

The audit found fundamental flaws in the funding law, insufficient guidance by the State Board of Education and a lack of oversight over spending by county offices of education and the California Department of Education.

At a press conference Nov. 5, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond said that although he had not read the audit, his department would follow up "when public resources are misused," while adding that districts are faced with difficult options. "I firmly believe they are frankly underfunded and making choices to manage their financial bottom line."

The audit said that the three districts and three county offices interviewed agreed that base funding does not cover necessary base costs. The audit found that districts consequently were using supplemental and concentration funds to cover "what appear to be base services," such as \$5.2 million that San Diego Unified used for library services in all district schools.

The funding formula permits districts to use targeted funding for districtwide purposes, whether for staff training or improving library services, if high-needs students make up more than 55% of a district's enrollment. But districts must justify the use by ensuring that the money would be "principally directed" to those students and shows that the money will be used effectively.

The audit couldn't find the justification in nearly three-quarters of 53 expenditures of the audited districts' LCAPs.

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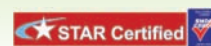
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