

Eric Hanushek : Fewer school days is the worst of budget options for California

By Eric Hanushek Special to the Mercury News San Jose Mercury News

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When asked to propose ways to deal with budget cuts, the National Park Service famously proposed closing the Washington Monument, and this tactic of choosing the most egregious conceivable action as a way of forestalling budget cuts is enshrined in budgeting lore.

But now California is moving to displace this symbol of governmental malfeasance with a much more harmful ploy: If you will not give us the money we want for schools, we will close them down. What I like to call the California Student Lockout sets a new standard of a government's serving government workers at the expense of its most vulnerable citizens -- in this case, children. This unfathomable choice being written into California contracts clearly trumps the Washington Monument strategy.

If the school budget must be reduced, an increase in class size would by all evidence do much less harm to students than shortening the school year further. If that was accomplished by letting the least effective teachers (as opposed to the youngest teachers) go, the evidence suggests that students would be helped -- and California might even move up from its current bottom rankings in student achievement.

Let's review. To deal with the fiscal situation, Gov. Jerry Brown made some spending cuts and, subject to voter approval, has called for higher sales and income tax rates (which are of course advertised as temporary). But to help stack the voters toward his proposal, he has also proclaimed broad automatic cuts in all spending if taxpayers do not go along with his plans.

A law passed in the eleventh hour of the legislative session said that, in anticipation of budget shortfalls, districts could not lay off teachers but could, with teacher union approval, shorten the school year by up to five days. Moreover, over the next two years, districts can shorten the school year by up to 30 days.

Capistrano Unified School District, a Southern California district with over 50,000 students, has agreed to a contract that could become a model -- and that underscores how the National Park Service is being displaced in ignominy. In the contract, the district has fully accepted the first five-day shortening of the school year. Moreover, the contract also says that the district will reduce the school year by an additional 10 days if the governor's initiative does not pass.

Capistrano's website misleadingly announced the "successful" deliberations with a headline: "Budget balanced with employee concessions." The Capistrano teachers also agreed to a 1.5 percent salary cut if the governor's plan fails, but this part of the package will not take effect until there is time for renegotiation.

It is hard to think of a worse choice. California, which already ranks 47th among the states in achievement, appears unapologetic about a 10 percent reduction in school time. There is no way its already handicapped students can easily make up for this.

Why is this such an attractive budgetary option for unions and school boards? By dealing with all budget issues as a temporary retrenchment, the district never has to adjust to a budget reality lower than its current budget. It need not permanently lay off any teachers.

If the governor and the various school boards do not succeed in extorting tax increases out of the population, the statement is clear: The students will be the first to suffer.

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