

California school funding measure being whittled away

By Kevin Yamamura, Sacramento Bee

When teachers unions and education groups backed Proposition 98 nearly a quarter-century ago, they told voters it was “a well-thought-out plan for California’s schools to once again be among the very best in the nation.”

But as public schools pack more than 30 students into kindergarten classrooms, cut a week of instruction and shutter campus libraries, education advocates wonder to what extent Proposition 98 has served its purpose.

The state ranks among the worst in students per teacher and spent 12 percent below the national average per pupil even before the recession. Compared to their high-water mark in 2007-08, K-12 schools and community colleges will receive 12 percent less in state and local funding this year.

“It certainly doesn’t appear as if education has been treated as a favorite child over the last few years when you look at all the cuts,” said veteran schools lobbyist Bob Blattner.

The law, approved in 1988, is complex enough that watching a video tutorial by the Legislative Analyst’s Office feels like upper-level college work. The measure is designed to ensure that K-12 schools and community colleges receive about 40 percent of state revenues, as well as increases for growth in taxes and student enrollment.

Proposition 98, and a revision in 1990, allow for a safety valve in bad fiscal years. California can cut schools as long as it vows to send enough money to districts in the future. Though it may be of little comfort to families with children in schools now, the state eventually owes about \$10.4 billion

more to education.

“I think schools would be worse off without it,” said John Mockler, the education consultant widely credited as author of the initiative. “I can’t imagine how much worse, but they would be worse.”

Many say Proposition 13’s limit on property taxes led to Proposition 98 as schools had to compete more with other public programs for resources. Mockler contends the real tipping point came when Gov. George Deukmejian and lawmakers used a \$1.1 billion surplus for tax rebates in 1987 rather than education.

The initiative itself has become a battle cry in state politics. Politicians now claim they “fully funded schools” if they follow Proposition 98 formulas, regardless of the condition of classrooms.

“I think that has hurt us over the years because nobody really understands what Proposition 98 is,” said Robert Miyashiro, vice president of School Services of California and an expert in K-12 finance. “People understand high class size, shortest school year, fewest textbooks.”

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