

Opinion: Complexity obscures California school money

By Dan Walters, Sacramento Bee

When Gov. Jerry Brown labeled the state budget a “pretzel palace of incredible complexity,” he almost certainly had in mind the budget’s largest, most complicated piece – financing schools.

Proposition 98, a measure that barely won voter approval in 1988, supposedly dictates what schools and their 6 million students are to receive from state and local taxes, but it’s so dense that only a few analysts profess to understand it, and they rarely agree.

Rather than take politics out of school finance, therefore, Proposition 98 invites political manipulation.

Typically, after much gnashing of teeth, the governor and the Legislature agree on a number each year and then interpret Proposition 98 to justify it.

Over the last half-decade, a recession-wracked budget could not be stretched to cover what Proposition 98 required, so shortfalls were placed on what insiders call “the credit card.” The state booked the money as a debt, now more than \$13 billion.

School Services of California, which advises school districts, recently generated a chart showing the gap between what schools should be receiving in unrestricted state and local funds under Proposition 98 – roughly three-fourths of their total revenues – and what they are actually receiving.

Read the whole story