

Brown wants local control for school districts

By Sharon Noguchi, San Jose Mercury News

Jerry Brown is pushing an appealing idea: Local control for local schools.

Bucking a national trend, the governor wants to back the state away from making schools account for their spending and for punishing them if their students lag in achievement.

But, perhaps surprisingly, school officials aren't jumping up and down about the proposal.



Gov. Jerry Brown wants to revamp education in California. Photo/LTN file

Elsewhere, education is becoming more results-driven, with everyone from Uncle Sam down to the smallest startup charter school demanding more and more evidence, usually through test scores, that they're getting enough bang for their buck.

The governor wants none of that – but it's unlikely he will get his way and free schools entirely from state oversight. Brown is proposing that school districts tie their plans for student achievement to their budgets. The 58 county offices of

education would have the responsibility of approving those plans.

“A central authority should only perform those tasks which cannot be performed at a more immediate or local level,” Brown said in his State of the State address.

“We are moving more authority, accountability and responsibility down to the local level,” said H.D. Palmer, spokesman for the state Department of Finance.

The governor would free schools from line-item reviews in Sacramento over how they spent specific pots of money, and wants the state not to punish schools whose students are failing. Instead, Brown puts his faith in the power of the people – to turn local school board members out of office if their schools don’t perform.

Many school officials like the possibility of reducing accounting and paperwork.

“I really appreciate that,” said Scott Laurence, superintendent of the San Mateo Union High School District. He’d like more leeway in using funds in ways the district determines best serves students.

But he worries that without specific state demands, schools won’t always pay as much attention as they should to various student needs.

In fact, Brown’s proposal sounds like it would take schools back 70 years, when local districts answered only to themselves and their voters. What prompted the state legislators to create 60-odd educational programs – focusing on migrant children, gifted and talented students, English-language learners, arts, counseling and more – was that schools weren’t meeting perceived needs.

“They have forced school districts to pay attention to groups

of students that haven't been a major emphasis for school districts," Laurence said.

What's more, the state Supreme Court has ruled that the state has a constitutional obligation to ensure that all students have basic equality of opportunity in education. "That's a non-delegable role," said John Affeldt, managing attorney of Public Advocates, a public-interest law firm that has sued the state on various school-equity issues.

That said, Affeldt too thinks the state is overly focused on specific kinds of achievement. "I think the pendulum probably has swung too far to narrow the whole focus of our educational venture around performance."

And while he advocates pushing the pendulum back, he said, "we can't swing it all the way back to the 1950s."

Brown may not want to tell districts how to spend money, but state legislators could have other ideas. "The Legislature has never shown any evidence they believe in local control," said Ron Bennett, president of School Services Inc., which advises most of the 1,000 school districts in the state on state education finance and law.

But whatever Sacramento decides, it will retain the role of enforcer of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which demands that schools receiving federal aid attain minimal levels of proficiency. The state jumps in with advisers and money – up to \$100,000 per school – when districts have large numbers of failing students. Nearly half of California's 1,000 school districts fall into that category, called "program improvement" by the federal government.

Even as school officials concede that it is cumbersome to answer to higher authorities, they point out that student achievement has steadily grown in the decade since the state beefed up its academic oversight. In addition, a laissez-faire accountability system could make comparisons among school

districts tricky.

If each district chooses how it wants to look at accountability, said Mike Nebesnick, director of educational accountability for San Jose Unified, "I don't think they're going to be lined up."

Brown stands behind the principle of "subsidiarity," which he said is violated "when distant authorities prescribe in minute detail what is taught, how it is taught and how it is to be measured."

But as much as educators may like flexibility, they worry mostly about funding. Californians have to demand an increase in per-pupil funding, said Wesley Smith, superintendent of the Morgan Hill Unified School District. "We are still 48 out of 50 in per-pupil funding. California students deserve more."