

# Brown proposes making it easier to track funding for needy kids

By Jessica Calefati, CalMatters

Gov. Jerry Brown's landmark school funding formula would not only win more money under the state budget blueprint he released last week, but also be subjected to the sort of transparency and accountability lawmakers and advocates for needy kids have been seeking since its adoption almost five years ago.

The formula directs significant sums of extra cash toward districts with foster youth, kids learning English and students from low-income families, acknowledging that it costs more to educate them. It also gives districts power to decide how to spend their extra money to shrink the academic achievement gap between those groups of students and their peers.

But as I reported in a June investigation for CALmatters, the funding is almost impossible to track and the results so far have been underwhelming.

In a summary outlining his spending priorities, Brown acknowledged a few of his well-intentioned policy's shortcomings and proposed some fixes that he thinks will help boost the state's sagging academic achievement. He conceded for the first time that valid "concerns have been raised" about the policy's effectiveness. It's a stunning departure. Previously, the governor had been resistant to changing the formula.

"While many districts have seized the opportunities offered under the formula to better serve their students, others have

been slower to make changes,” Brown wrote.

To “improve student achievement and transparency,” Brown proposes requiring districts to demonstrate a connection between their priorities and the way they spend the extra cash generated by their disadvantaged students. He also wants the state to start calculating and reporting the amount of extra funding each district receives.

An open report I wrote last March explained how tough it is to follow the money without any of that information.

But even as he called for state-level policy changes aimed at boosting achievement, Brown emphasized his belief in local control and struck a defiant tone when asked at a Capitol news conference about California’s lackluster standardized test scores.

“Kids learn at home or in the classroom. When that door shuts, there’s no legislator, there’s no governor,” Brown said. “So people who really want to help a school that’s not performing, go to that school, go talk to that principal. That’s the philosophy I want to promote.”

“We’re looking in the wrong place when we’re looking at Sacramento,” he added.

Democratic Assemblywoman Shirley Weber of San Diego has been fighting for fiscal transparency alongside other lawmakers and advocates for disadvantaged kids since Brown signed the formula into law in 2013.

In an interview, she said she doesn’t want to “declare victory” until she’s had a chance to review the proposals’ details more closely, but that she’s hopeful the policy might finally get fixed.

“A year ago, I told the governor that he needs to solve this transparency problem before he leaves office,” Weber said. “At

least now I know I wasn't hollering into the wilderness for 40 years like Moses or something. He was listening. I think this was his way of saying, 'I heard you, Shirley.'"

Carrie Hahnel, the deputy director of research and policy at Education Trust-West, a nonprofit advocacy organization committed to closing the achievement gap, shares Weber's cautious optimism.

On one hand, she said, it's exciting to see the administration recognize the concerns that advocates, researchers and journalists have expressed about the lack of budget transparency. But she called the language in the budget summary "weak," noting that it doesn't explicitly demonstrate any new commitments.

Hahnel's organization and others will learn more about the proposal later this month when Brown's Department of Finance releases detailed budget bill language. This spring, the proposal will be vetted by members of the state Legislature's fiscal committees.

Many questions about the scope of the plan remain unanswered, but even still, Hahnel said the shift in tone is something to celebrate: "He's finally acknowledging that something needs to be done."