



## **‘Ideal’ education system widely disputed**

**Privatization, local control over money among suggestions**

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Editor’s note: This is part two in a two-part series on education spending that began in Sunday’s Daily Press.

Ken Larson has heard dozens of so-called solutions to transform California’s public education system into a cost-effective, well-oiled machine. But he’s yet to encounter a plan he fully endorses.

“Everybody comes up with these ideas on how to spend less,” said Larson, who has worked at local public schools for nearly 13 years. “The problem with every idea that I’ve heard is accountability.”

The end-goal is the same: Produce good schools that spend wisely and achieve high student success. However, the best paths to get there are disputed widely by educators, administrators and policy analysts.

One end of the spectrum calls for bolstering spending in the state’s \$66 billion K-12 education system. The opposite end calls for strictly privatized schools and vouchers for low income families.

Neal McCluskey, associate director for the CATO Center for Educational Freedom, said taxpayer money would be best spent in a privatized school-choice system, where all parents pay schools directly and low-income families are funded by vouchers.

“Private schools have to compete to succeed, which means they have to be efficient,” McCluskey said. “If all schools compete on price, you would begin to see expenditures going down, or you would see people getting a lot better quality education for the price.”

**But Rick Piercy, who has worked at local private and public schools for 30 years, said the voucher system has its own inherent problems. Too many groups could start schools for the wrong reasons, aiming for political or financial gain instead of getting students the best education possible, he said.**

**“If it was wide open and non-regulated, I think it could be a disaster for kids,” said Piercy, CEO of the Lewis Center for Educational Research.**

**Instead, Piercy supports a public system that is entirely school-choice and demands accountability from schools based on student achievement. Additionally, Piercy said that school districts should contract out to county and state agencies for the specific services they want, which would reverse the current topdown system.**

**“Hold the schools accountable for their scores, and more importantly let parents choose**

**where they go so that poor schools just won't be chosen by parents," Piercy said.**

With eight of its own parent-choice schools, the Victor Elementary School District is "working toward ensuring all schools are schools of choice," VESD Deputy Superintendent Dale Marsden said. School choice could be successful if all levels — including high schools — stayed relatively small at about 500 to 750 students and school-site administrators had more control over plans, Marsden said.

Like Marsden, many educators simply call for more local control over funds.

"If we had a smaller bureaucracy and if we had more leeway on how to spend our money, I think you'd see a significant improvement in public education," said Herb Calderon, interim superintendent for the Victor Valley Union High School District.

About two-thirds of the state's K-12 education budget goes toward general purpose spending, while one-third is categorical funding — monies earmarked for specific purposes like physical education or music. The state Legislature approved some temporary flexibility in those funds with the new budget, and many superintendents would push to make that flexibility permanent.

Unfunded mandates can also drain the public education system. For example, state and federal laws require public schools to provide free special education, but the state and federal governments do not fully compensate schools for that work. **The Lewis Center's Academy for Academic Excellence K-12 charter school is compensated for roughly half of its special education costs, Piercy said.** The VVUHSD spends an additional \$6 million per year from its general funds to foot the bill for its special education services, Calderon said.

Whether the state education budget is bloated or under-funded, public educators at every level have said they are fed up with delays and faulty budget allocations by the state Legislature, which made \$8 billion in cuts this year to K-12 schools midyear. And looming ahead is the Legislature's May revision, which could bring deeper cuts.

"We need a permanent funding mechanism that the Legislature can't mess around with to actually fund our schools," Larson said.