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California's schools

From bad to worse

Lessons from a state that has let its pupils down

Mar 31st 2010 | LOS ANGELES

AS THE Obama administration spreads enthusiasm about a proposal to replace a patchwork of state education standards with national ones, it might also heed a cautionary tale. In the 1990s California too established rigorous standards. "We thought they were the highest," up there with those of Massachusetts and Indiana, says Mike Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education think-tank in Washington, DC. But California never translated those standards into results. Its public schools are, with some exceptions, awful. Moreover, the state's fiscal crisis is about to make them even worse.

California's 8th-graders (14-year-olds), for example, ranked 46th in maths last year. Only Alabama, Mississippi and the District of Columbia did worse. California also sends a smaller share of its high-school graduates to college than all but three other states. One of its roughly 1,000 school districts, Los Angeles Unified, which happens to be the second-largest in the country, has just become the first to be investigated by the federal Office for Civil Rights about whether it adequately teaches pupils who have little or no English.

Eli Broad, a Los Angeles philanthropist who is trying to reform education, blames a combination of

California's dysfunctional governance, with "elected school boards made up of wannabes and unions", and the fact that the state's teachers' union is both more powerful and "more regressive" than elsewhere. The California Teachers Association (CTA) is the biggest lobby in the state, having spent some \$210m in the past decade—more than any other group—to intervene in California's politics.

The CTA has used its money to defeat almost any reform that might have turned the standards into reality. It helped to defeat ballot measures that, for example, would have given California a school-voucher system and changed the probation period for teachers. It ensured that the state has "laughably easy teacher tests", as Mr Petrilli puts it. It is also the biggest donor to the state's Democratic Party.

Another factor is money. California's infamous Proposition 13 of 1978 cut property taxes, the main source of revenue for municipalities and school districts. Other ballot measures, such as Proposition 98 in 1988, were meant to restore school spending, with horrendously complex funding formulas. But although schools account for the largest part of California's budget, California entered the recession ranking 46th in spending per pupil. It has the largest classrooms in the country, with 23.4 students per teacher in 2008, almost twice the national average. Schools in black and Latino districts fare much worse than those in white areas.

Now spending is being cut further, as California has to keep plugging budget holes. Funding per pupil in the state has dropped almost 11% in the past two fiscal years, and is certain to drop further. This fiscal year, the school districts have been able to use federal funds from the stimulus programme to mitigate the effects. But those funds end in the fiscal year that starts in July.

United States