California State PTA Responds with “Fact Check” to Mercury-News Editorial
Statements about Propositions 38 deserve closer examination
October 1, 2012

The Sept. 29 editorial by the San Jose Mercury News about Propositions 38 and 30 re-affirmed one point nearly all Californians understand: “School funding is critical.”

But the editorial confuses important features that distinguish Proposition 38 from Proposition 30 – features that help explain why the California State PTA believes Proposition 38 offers the best approach to truly addressing California’s school funding crisis.

Below are four statements in particular from the editorial that deserve closer examination.

1.  *The Mercury News wrote, “Proposition 38 would raise more money for schools overall but would pile on bureaucracy and restrict flexibility.”*

   We agree Proposition 38 would raise more money for schools. Given the horrific cuts that have occurred to schools the past several years, we support this initiative because it boosts funding the most.

   In terms of “piling on bureaucracy,” if that means allowing only one percent of the funds for local administrative costs while requiring greater transparency and reporting of school budgets so taxpayers can be assured their money is spent to “improve students' academic performance, graduation rates, and vocational, career, college and life readiness” (as stated in the initiative) – well, Proposition 38 is guilty as charged.

   If “restricting flexibility” means prohibiting the state legislature from directing how any of the new school funds can be spent – Proposition 38 is guilty again.

   And if it means requiring that local parents and school communities have real input at local meetings into how the new funds will be spent at their local schools – again, we admit, that’s what Proposition 38 does.

2.  *The editorial states: [Proposition 38] would send money directly to schools, not districts – even money for technology. That would be crazy. Some schools have all new iPads, while others have a few old desktops here and there. The money can't be used to increase teacher salaries. But that's often what's needed to attract talented instructors to under-achieving schools. Tax dollars for schools should go to local districts, which see the big picture and have boards that are accountable to voters.*

   It’s true Proposition 38 requires that funds be spent at our school sites based on student enrollment, thereby ensuring that every local school receives its fair share. With Proposition 38, the local school board still has the final decision about how the new money is spent because the board is accountable to the public. That’s clearly stated in the initiative. What’s new and better in Proposition 38 is that the school board first must seek
local input from school sites, then the board must report and show how the new money is being used to improve student outcomes. And every school receives its share of new money.

Proposition 38 is carefully designed to prevent the scenario the newspaper describes, where some schools that may already have adequate technology would be forced to spend their new funding on more of it.

Proposition 38 gives parents, teachers, administrators and community members at those sites more say because they know best about their local needs. With Proposition 38, they would be able to recommend to the board that new monies be used for technology if that’s what is most needed at their school; or for smaller class sizes if that’s what’s needed; or for more science and arts programs, or a new music teacher, if that’s what has been cut.

There is also a provision that provides a portion of the funding for local schools to be spent “exclusively for up-to-date teaching materials and technology and to strengthen skills of school staff in ways that improve students’ academic performance, graduation rates, and vocational, career, college and life readiness.” Given the importance of up-to-date instructional materials, staff development and technology, we hardly think that is a crazy emphasis – and again, local school communities will give input and local school boards will approve exactly what the funds are used for.

Lastly, it’s true that Proposition 38 funds cannot be used for salary increases or pensions, though they can absolutely be used to hire back teaching and staff positions or instructional days that have been eliminated due to the devastating recent cuts we have suffered.

Restoring programs and services for children must be the top priority of these new funds. Funding for salary increases could still come from current Proposition 98 funding. Proposition 38 allows exactly this sort of local flexibility to meet local needs because it recognizes education is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. Proposition 38 provides far more funding and offers important and needed reforms now to advance a greater role for local school communities.

3. The editorial states: If Proposition 38 passes and 30 fails, schools and higher education could be cut significantly.

This is a grave scenario enacted by the legislature when it approved the current state budget, though it is not specifically in the initiative language of Propositions 30 or 38.

When Proposition 38 passes, as Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson has suggested, the legislature could go back and revise the budget based on new revenues in Proposition 38 in order to prevent cuts to programs we all care about like higher education.

The total trigger cuts to UC and CSU approved in the state budget are $500 million. Proposition 38 provides $1.7 billion of general fund relief in the last half of the current budget year and more than $3 billion in each of the first full four years. That’s more than enough to offset those cuts if the legislature so chooses.
Because Proposition 38 raises more money overall (an average of $10 billion per year compared to $6 billion per year), Proposition 38 not only provides enough to give K-12 schools the substantial infusion they need, it also provides relief to the general fund (by repaying $3 billion per year of bond debt for the first four years) so that cuts to higher education programs can be avoided if Proposition 30 fails. The legislature would have to go back and revise the budget it passed earlier to plan for the new revenue Proposition 38 generates. If recent history is an indicator, the legislature has experience at going back and doing just that. This may not be the approach that the legislature had in mind when it passed the budget, but that doesn’t mean it’s not a better course.

4. The editorial states: Existing school funding formulas are a mess. Wealthy districts with engaged parents often receive thousands more dollars per student than schools in low-income areas with far greater needs. Earlier this year, [Governor] Brown proposed sensible reforms that would direct a per-child allocation to each district, with more for high-need populations, and eliminate most restrictions on how money can be spent. It went nowhere, but we hope he tries again.

These are exactly reasons why Proposition 38 was crafted the way it is. First, the new funds must be spent at every school, including charter schools, so that schools in low-income areas don’t get shortchanged.

More significantly, Prop 38 provides an additional 18 percent allocation for the highest needs students (those who qualify for the free lunch program). We know it takes more resources to support high needs children, and Proposition 38 directly addresses that.

Investing more in preschool and high needs kids, coupled with the infusion of substantially more funding for every school – that’s exactly the type of smart policy course our state needs to take – and Proposition 38 leads the way.

The California State PTA is proud to support Proposition 38 because it provides the most new funding directly for our schools, and it creates meaningful local control and accountability. In addition the measure provides $12 billion in general fund relief for the state budget in the first four years to help prevent cuts to other programs.

We encourage voters to read the initiative to understand the important advantages it provides.