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Adult Education In California:

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GOV. BROWN IS right: Adult education has become a financial problem for California taxpayers. This was the major issue he and I discussed in our first meeting in July, several months after I arrived from Maine to be director of the Postsecondary Education Commission.

Adult education is a priority item not only on the agendas of the governor and the State Legislature, but also of the educational community. And beyond that, it is an issue of direct personal importance to the thousands of California adults who have so much at stake.

Adult education will continue to be a subject of controversy and concern throughout the state until we resolve certain fundamental problems.

NEXT WEEK, the Postsecondary Education Commission will meet to consider our staff's proposals for resolving some of these problems. Underlying that discussion will be the basic question: What are we going to do about the rapid growth and escalating costs of adult education programs?

The problem is massive and complex. For now, we are concentrating on the adult education problems of our unified school districts and community colleges. Later, we will deal with the extension and adult education programs of the University of California and the California State University and Colleges.

California has promoted adult education with the best of intentions: To make "educational opportunity" a reality for all Californians, not just a fashionable slogan. Suddenly, we are



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the victims of our own success. The demand for adult education has surpassed our best projections and threatens to exceed our resources as well. An example: From 1974 to 1975, enrollment in adult education jumped 23 per cent and the cost of adult education to the state went up 15 per cent. (These figures are for the adult education programs in the community colleges and secondary schools and include full- and part-time students.)

One of the fundamental problems in solving the adult education dilemma is the patchwork system we have built, a patchwork of funding, delivery systems, definitions of students, and objectives. We finance adult education with local, state and federal taxes as well as user fees. We provide it through a variety of outlets, not a single unified system. We have no simple definition of just who is an

"adult student" so we fall back on technical terms such as "defined adult" and "other than defined adult," definitions based not on courses taken, but on the age of the student and the number of hours enrolled.

We design our programs for adults of all ages who have different needs and different objectives: Young adults who want a second chance at college or a new vocation, older adults who want to expand their intellectual and cultural horizons. Our educational philosophy says that all these objectives are "good"; our economy tells us that we have to make choices.

THERE ARE SEVERAL difficult questions we must answer: What is the state's commitment to adult education? How much will that commitment cost? Are we willing and able to pay that cost? Are all adult education courses equally beneficial or should we establish some priorities?

I believe we have some very sensible and workable solutions to offer.

Presently, adult education is funded on the basis of the number of students enrolled. The state provides money to each district on the basis of the number of adult students enrolled, regardless of the kinds of courses they are taking. It may be a course in basic English or college biology or flower arrangement or nursing. The end result is that the more students a district enrolls, the more state and local money it receives. There is no relation between the amount of money the district receives and the kinds of courses being offered or the cost of offering them.

The relationship between this method of financing adult education

'We Are Victims Of Success'

and the health of the state's economy, or its financial resources, is, at best, very tenuous. Further, there is an inverse relationship between the economy and enrollments: When the economy goes down, the demand for adult education goes up, particularly in vocational programs.

IN VIEW OF today's uncertain economy, we are faced with some hard choices in funding adult education. I believe that state support should reflect state priorities: Adult education courses that provide the greatest direct benefits to our society are the courses that deserve state support. For example, both economists and educators agree that general education programs directly benefit society; thus, these programs are sound investments for the state. Vocational education and retraining programs have the potential for reducing unemployment and related social and economic problems; they obviously can benefit society as a whole.

The same convincing argument cannot be made for recreational and avocational courses, even though they may well provide great pleasure and personal benefit for the individual taking the course. This does not mean that districts should necessarily receive less state support, only that the state's dollars should go to those courses that reflect its priorities. This approach would enable the district to increase educational opportunities for those adults who need them most. It also would preserve the concept of local control.

THE STATE FINANCES adult education through two complicated methods known as the Foundation Aid Program and the Revenue Limit. The

Foundation Program guarantees a minimum level (\$125) of state support per student regardless of the wealth of the district; the maximum level of state support is approximately \$1,100 per full-time student. For part-time adult students, the maximum level of state support is approximately \$600. The revenue limit, established by the legislature in 1972, is the maximum combined amount of state and local tax money which can be spent per student. Under this method of financing, however, as enrollment increases, the proportion of the state's support for each student also increases. This is the situation which is causing most of our problems.

The financial demands which the Foundation Program placed on the state treasury led the governor and the legislature to impose a "5 per cent cap" on state-aided enrollments. Under this cap, enrollment increases in excess of 5 per cent over last year's level must be entirely supported by the local taxpayer.

The cap has produced a temporary limit on the skyrocketing state cost of adult education. However, the cap is a Band-aid and not a cure. We have found that the cap reduces educational opportunity, particularly in school districts not blessed with an abundance of wealth. While some districts have increased enrollment by increasing local taxes, other districts have been unable to do so, regardless of how strong the demand or the need for increased educational opportunity.

THE NEGATIVE effects of the cap demand a prompt solution be offered by the commission. We believe that state support should reflect the reality of its resources and those of the local taxpayer. This can be ac-

complished by replacing the Foundation Program with a method of funding called "percentage equalizing."

Stated as simply as possible, percentage equalizing would: (1) Limit the state's share to a fixed percentage of the total expenditures of community colleges and adult schools; and (2) equalize the differences in the tax rates which occur as a result of inequalities in districts' wealth.

Beyond this, the state would establish priorities in funding courses and programs by making support of recreational and avocational courses a district and student responsibility.

I believe our proposal is a sensible alternative to the cap, an alternative which limits the demand for more taxpayer dollars, addresses local and state sources of funding, and requires districts to become increasingly efficient, particularly in poorer economic times.

AT THE SAME time, the proposed program is not inflexible, for it would allow each district to set its own priorities as it plans for the future. Finally, our alternative to the cap would gradually narrow the gap between wealthy districts which are able to spend more per student and districts with less ability to provide for needs through local taxes—thus equalizing the tax burden statewide.

In the weeks ahead, there will be many solutions offered. By law, the commission's role is to provide advice to the governor and the legislature on educational issues. We agree with the governor that adult education is a priority issue. He might well look closely at our proposal. It has many of the problem-solving ingredients he has been looking for.

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