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Reclaiming education dollars

By Josh Becker and Joe Ross Sep 10, 2019

School districts get to keep and put to use their excess-of-target revenue, if any, raised from local property taxes. County offices of education, in contrast, are not allowed to do so. Instead, millions of dollars are swept each year from county education budgets and sent off to Sacramento.

Where this money ends up is a scandal.



Josh Becker and Joe Ross

As part of a budget gimmick enacted in 2013-14, tens of millions of dollars in “excess” local property tax revenues raised for the San Mateo and Santa Clara county offices of education are swept away and diverted into — wait for it — the state court system.

Let’s repeat that: The court system.

Shockingly, this is a function of the California Education Code — Section 2578 to be precise — which diverts money from education and effectively puts it into criminal justice.

And to be clear we are talking about a proverbial one-way street. This money does not come back to the county from which it was taken. Our local courts obtain no measurable benefit from this budget gimmick.

We support appropriate funding for the courts. And we are proud that county education offices do a lot of important work focused on youth in the criminal justice system. But our local education dollars should not be diverted — least of all by the Education Code — into the statewide criminal justice system. That’s backwards.

Instead, these “excess” property tax dollars in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties could be used to address the same very serious problem from which those tax dollars arise: the soaring cost of local housing.

These funds could also be used for critical initiatives like the Big Lift, which works to address the achievement gap through intensive early childhood education, or an “Equity Fund” to help districts in which the spending per pupil is significantly lower than others.

But workforce housing is a threshold challenge. School districts from South San Francisco to San Jose are struggling like never before to attract teachers. To borrow a political slogan first made famous in New York City and now sadly just as applicable in Silicon Valley: “The rent is too damn high.”

In fact, all public agencies are facing a similar struggle with recruitment. It’s obvious that if teachers and other public employees won’t move here because of the rent, then everyone — homeowners and renters alike — have a serious problem.

We are inspired by the San Mateo County Community College District, which years ago anticipated the soaring costs of housing and built apartments and townhouses for faculty as a recruitment strategy.

It worked.

And now there is a way to build more workforce housing without raising taxes by a single dime.

The sum of local property taxes that our two local county offices of education collect each year in “excess” of their state funding targets is roughly \$45 million. These are education dollars. They should not be diverted by budget gimmick into the statewide court system.

These funds would do much more tangible good if they stayed local.

For one, just imagine what \$45 million a year could do for affordable teacher housing.

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