

COMMENTARY

Fiscal Inferno

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[In his second public forum on the state's budget crisis](#) Governor Brown focused on California's education system. The clear message, after three years of cuts that have fallen disproportionately on schools, is that things will get worse—probably a lot worse—before they get better. The forum also illuminated the formidable obstacles that confront any effort to reform California's education system. The most challenging of these is the declared confidence of a substantial majority of Californians that we can have an elite education system while severely limiting taxes.

The gap between what citizens want and what they're willing to pay for has been [the headline finding in PPIC's annual education surveys](#) for the past several years. A strong majority of Californians does not want to see cuts in education funding, but a similar majority is unwilling to raise taxes (or in the case of higher education, to raise fees) to support the state's schools and universities. One clear purpose of Brown's forums—and of the scorched earth budget that he has promised to deliver in January—is to measure the distance between the quality of educational services that citizens have come to expect and the taxes that they are willing to pay to provide those services.

[The January 2011 budget](#) will offer a detailed picture of what a Banana Republic education system looks like.

The big question, though, is what happens afterward. Will the shock of recognition be sufficiently powerful to persuade Californians to support higher taxes to pay for the schools and universities they say they want for the state's children? And if it is, what changes in education policy will they receive in return? The first six months of Brown's administration will tell the tale.

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