

COMMENTARY

It Won't Be Easy, John Deasy

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[John Deasy](#) deserves the welcoming he is getting as superintendent of the nation's second largest school district. He should savor the moment; he'll need it.

[The public and private speculation about Deasy](#) concerns whether he is really a "reformer," whatever that means, what [deals he has cut with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa](#) or [the Gates Foundation](#), or whether [United Teachers Los Angeles will electioneer a hostile school board in March](#).

Interesting though it is, the speculation masks deeper substantive issues that both the new superintendent and those interested in education policy need to understand.

Put plainly, the Los Angeles Unified School District is facing fiscal and demographic pressures that could easily lead to its fiscal collapse, this despite the encouraging news that [Gov. Jerry Brown's budget does not call for another round of deep cuts for public education](#). In documents presented in October, the school board learned that its \$7-billion general fund budget faces a storm of fiscal pressure, most of which will not abate as the California economy recovers.

The district enrollment will continue to decline, following demographic trends. The resident population is aging and immigration to the district has slowed to a trickle. In the last decade, district enrollment has declined by more than 135,000 students. Because L.A. Unified is dependent on average-daily-attendance driven allocations from the state, the impacts on the budget are and will be drastic. According to the district's calculations, enrollment declines in just this last year will decrease revenue by \$100 million.

Meanwhile, the costs for special education continue to increase. By definition, these programs for the learning handicapped require a more intensive and expensive mix of services, which over the last decade have increased by \$200 million.

And like other employers, the school district feels the pinch of much-larger-than-inflation health care costs. Since 2002, the health and welfare budget has increased by 71 percent, to just shy of \$1-billion a year.

The only semi-good news is that the decreases in state revenue that the district has experienced over the last four years may temper, but even this hope is contingent on [Gov. Brown's budget being approved and voters agreeing to extend taxes that are due to expire](#).

So, it's a cold welcome that John Deasy gets. In that, he is no different from his predecessors. In the research reported in Learning from L.A., an organizational and political history of the district, we found that every reform effort in the last 40 years was hobbled because grand ideas mixed with hard fiscal reality. The school board election or the mayor's ministrations won't change that reality. Now, as then, innovative changes in learning and teaching will rest on already hard-pressed people working harder and

smarter.

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