

Advocates kick up lobbying efforts for new education dollars

Mary Plummer | May 15th, 2014, 5:00am



Students from the Center Theatre Group Student Ambassadors Program interview a high school student about arts education in downtown Los Angeles. The student ambassadors are part of an advocacy team that's trying to secure funding for arts education under Gov. Jerry Brown's new LCFF budget process.

The second in a series of stories on how Southern California schools are being affected by new state laws giving parents and others more say in classroom spending.

As school districts across California finalize budgets infused with an anticipated \$4.5 billion in extra state cash, a long list of groups are lobbying for expanded or new programs.

"There is definitely a sense of: if not now, when?" said Kim Pattillo Brownson, the director of educational equity at the Advancement Project, a civil rights organization. She's lobbying for school districts to expand preschool programs.

The state's new law, the Local Control Funding Formula, "holds the opportunity to actually begin to get ahead of these achievement gap problems," she said.

Advocates like her are excited because the law gives school districts huge leeway in how to spend the extra money — as long as it helps disadvantaged kids, such as English learners, children living in poverty or those in the foster care system.

They argue things like early childhood programs, arts education and counseling can go a long way toward helping kids do better in school. **(Want to get involved? See list below for ideas and guides.)**

Pattillo Brownson's group is part of a coalition pushing the Los Angeles Unified School District to use some of its estimated \$137 million in extra money for next school year to boost early education. It's a huge group: Children Now, Families in Schools, First 5 L.A., Los Angeles Universal Preschool, Early Edge California, the California Community Foundation, the Los Angeles Chamber and the California Preschool Business Advisory Council have all joined.

But despite their phone calls and other direct lobbying, L.A. Unified hasn't yet made any plans to expand early education next year using Local Control Funding Formula dollars. School board members vote on a final budget next month.

It's not that the value of early education hasn't been proven — numerous studies show it helps kids perform at higher levels in Kindergarten and beyond in everything from language to literacy to math. It's just that they're not the only ones asking and there's only so much money to go around.

California public schools have taken a big hit since the recession. Education cuts here have been among the worst in the nation. Since the 2008 fiscal year, per pupil spending is down 13.8 percent, [according to the most recent data available](#). "Even with Local Control Funding Formula, which is going to help a great deal, California still lags behind other states nationally," said Shane Martin, Dean of Loyola Marymount's School of Education. "We don't have enough money to fund all of the hopes, desires and ideas that all of these groups have."

But that's not stopping the California Alliance for Arts Education.

Along with other arts groups, it's been holding webinars and encouraging high school students to advocate for arts instruction to ask school boards across the state to use some of the new funds on arts education.

Research shows that arts education boosts student engagement, helps prevent drop-outs and can help students improve tests scores in other subjects like language arts and history. Access to music, dance, theater and visual arts instruction is required by state law in California for all students in first through twelfth grade.

But it's well-known that many students in the state go without access. [A survey of 41 school districts in Southern California by KPCC](#) found that no K-12 school districts reported offering all four art forms to every student, every year as required by law.

"We look at it as an opportunity to educate people about how the arts can contribute to high-need student success," said Sibyl O'Malley, director of communications for the alliance. "And for communities who want the arts to really be able to own that and make that happen."

But competition is tough. Classroom teachers, custodial staff and technology advocates have all raised their hands, too, saying they need a boost.

And time is running out. School districts have until June 30 to finalize their budget plans.

Want to know more about California's new Local Control Funding Formula? Here are some resources:

- **WestEd** is running [the official resource site](#) for the California Department of Education. It includes [a series of videos](#) that explain how the new funding law works.
- The **California Alliance for Arts Education's** Student Voices Campaign is collecting videos responding to the question, "What does your creativity look like?" [Through the campaign's website](#), students can share their videos directly with elected representatives to advocate for arts education.
- [The non-profit EdSource has developed a guide](#) to the Local Control Funding Formula, which includes videos and easy-to-digest graphics to explain how things work.
- **Children Now**, an advocacy group for kids' health and education, has created [a website dedicated to the Local Control Funding Formula](#). It includes a page with suggestions on how to take action, like using the Twitter hashtag #LCFFEngage.
- **Arts for LA** partnered with the **California Alliance for Arts Education** and **Arts for All** [to create a template for school districts to use as they develop their new budgets](#). They put together [resources here](#), which are helpful for those new to the process.
- Most school districts have information about the new funding law on their website. [Los Angeles Unified has information available via this website](#). You can find [information for Glendale Unified here](#). Santa Ana Unified also [has information available online](#).