



Design engineers from New England Sheet Metal, bottom right, on a walk at Fresno Unified School District's Gaston Middle School on Wednesday, July 24, 2013. Don Ulrich of Clovis Unified writes that billions of voter-approved bonds await to be sold so more school construction projects can move forward. ERIC PAUL ZAMORA - Fresno Bee file

#### OPINION

## New schools are badly needed. The Legislature needs to push the governor on bond sales

BY DON ULRICH

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Gov. Jerry Brown's revised budget only got education funding half right. While districts across California are grateful for the governor's commitment to fully funding the voter-approved Proposition 98 school funding initiative and continuing to fully fund and increase the Local Control Funding Formula, this commitment only pays for the instruction and instructional materials inside existing classrooms. Students also need highly functioning, uncrowded classrooms. How can teachers expect to be successful in aging classrooms that don't have such basic amenities as air conditioning or working security systems?

Unfortunately, this is where the governor's revised budget fell short, as it failed to commit any meaningful voter-approved funding to the repair and construction of school facilities.

In 2016, California voters went to the polls and made it unequivocally clear that they wanted elected state officials to spend more money on school construction and repair. They passed Proposition 51, which included \$7 billion to upgrade aging K-12 classrooms, build new schools where needed and build career technical education facilities to support better CTE programs.

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Since the passage of Proposition 51, the backlog of unfunded projects has grown to \$3.8 billion for state matching funds.

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The governor has only authorized \$640 million in Proposition 51 funds in this year's. Even with the new \$8 billion in additional state revenues, the governor is proposing to only fund 16.8 percent of the backlog and only expend 9 percent of the K-12 school facility bonds authorized by the voters in 2016.

We need the Legislature to significantly reduce this backlog during budget negotiations, or any school district that submitted school construction applications after October 2014 will be forced to wait until fall 2019 – five years after initial submission – to receive school construction funds. At this rate, it will be a decade before all Proposition 51 bonds are sold.



Don Ulrich, deputy superintendent of Clovis Unified School District  
Clovis Unified

This decade scenario is ineffective, inefficient and flies in the face of what voters want for their schools. The bonds need to be sold in three years. Currently, there is \$7.5 billion in unsold voter-approved K-12 bonds that are supposed to be used exclusively to fund school construction projects and address the current backlog of school construction applications. The Legislature needs to take this opportunity and do what the voters wanted: invest in school campuses.

The state has historically authorized the expenditure of similarly sized school facilities bonds within four years of voters passing an initiative. To get back on track, the state needs to sell more than \$3 billion Proposition 51 bonds by the end of this year. The benefits of doing so are many: job creation as school construction projects get underway; and more students being able to access updated science laboratories,

school libraries and improved technology in the classroom.

Finally, if the state keeps this exceptionally slow pace of spending school construction dollars, it is the schools – the kids and the parents – that are getting shortchanged. Every year, construction costs and interest rates escalate, which diminishes a district's purchasing power; forcing school districts to pay more for less in return. Even more concerning, if the state continues to delay the distribution of facility funds, school districts are forced to make impossible budgeting choices: do they divert funds away from educational programming to pay for mission critical facility projects so that classrooms are air-conditioned, roofs aren't leaking and seismic safety retrofits are completed?

With a sizable budget reserve in place and voters mandating that they want schools repaired, no school district should be forced to consider those alternatives. The Legislature needs to help the governor respect the will of California voters and make Proposition 51 bond sales a priority in the upcoming budget negotiations. Students deserve campuses that can serve their needs and the adults need to make sure that happens.

*Don Ulrich is Clovis Unified School District's deputy superintendent and also currently the president of the statewide Coalition for Adequate School Housing.*

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