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From the Daily Journal archives

Public school funding disparity still growing

By John Horgan

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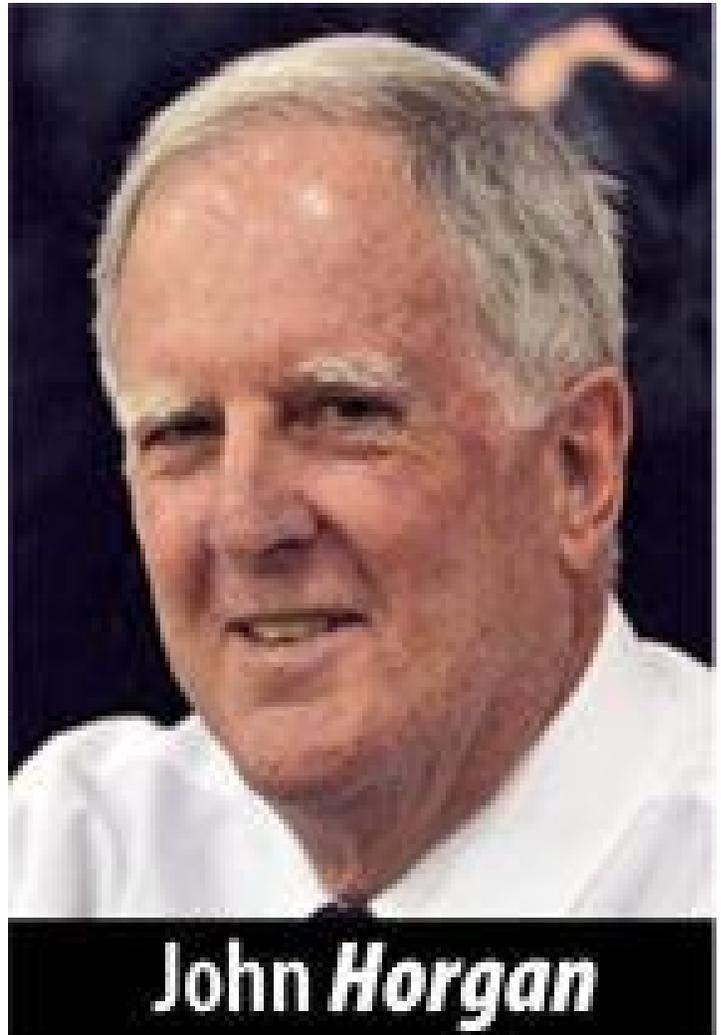


The stark local disparity in public school dollars continues to grow. It's been a San Mateo County phenomenon for decades.

The latest data released by the state Department of Education indicate that, for the first time, the county's highest-spending public school district provides three times more fiscal resources per student than the lowest-spending district.

In 2019-20, according to the department's online figures, the Woodside Elementary District spent \$33,248 per pupil. Conversely, the Pacifica Elementary District spent \$10,932, a yawning gap of \$22,316 per child.

Throughout the county, the listed per child expenditure numbers vary wildly. The causes are many.



California public school finance is a complex subject that tends to make the average citizen's eyes glaze over when studying the convoluted topic in any detail.

In a nutshell, here are some key historical factors that have helped to create this striking imbalance: Court decisions and finance measures that moved most districts' taxing ability into a financial system controlled by the state; exemptions for districts who have the ability to self-fund due to very high property values; historical anomalies that essentially kept relatively low spending levels from rising dramatically over time.

And there's more. Take self-funded Woodside as a prime example. Like several other wealthy Peninsula communities, it features two important monetary boosts that go beyond high land values and the typically generous tax haul that go with them.

Woodside voters have blessed the district with hefty parcel tax revenue; further, affluent families and others continue to provide extra cash via donations.

Here are the 2019-20 per pupil total operating expenditure figures (which do not include capital improvement costs) for each of the county's 23 K-12 public school districts:

Bayshore Elementary, \$15,376

Belmont-Redwood Shores Elementary, \$15,479

Brisbane Elementary, \$19,879

Burlingame Elementary, \$11,808

Cabrillo Unified, \$12,855

Hillsborough City Elementary, \$25,436

Jefferson Elementary, \$13,255

Jefferson Union High, \$15,681

La Honda-Pescadero Unified, \$22,960

Las Lomas Elementary, \$24,864

Menlo Park City Elementary, \$19,970

Millbrae Elementary, \$11,888

Pacifica Elementary, \$10,932

Portola Valley Elementary, \$27,780

Ravenswood City Elementary, \$23,413

Redwood City Elementary, \$14,994

San Bruno Park Elementary, \$13,227

San Carlos Elementary, \$13,854

San Mateo Union High, \$19,964

San Mateo-Foster City Elementary, \$13,150

Sequoia Union High, \$21,449

South San Francisco Unified, \$14,042

Woodside Elementary, \$33,248