Editorial: Time to make the 'Year of Education' a reality

With school funds poised for big growth, Schwarzenegger has a rare opportunity

- Published 12:00 am PST Monday, January 7, 2008

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger doesn't like incremental changes – "biting away on the edges," he calls them. Big challenges, he believes, deserve big, bold solutions. So he made 2006 the year for infrastructure bonds and the historic bill to roll back greenhouse gases and 2007 the year for health care reform.

The governor announced long ago that 2008 would be the "Year of Education," so expectations are high for Tuesday's State of the State address. Secretary of Education David Long has told Californians to expect "a very comprehensive plan, a plan that is going to be very bold, and a plan that is going to be very passionate."

The opportunity is ripe. While the short-term budget picture is grim, by 2010 the picture for education improves dramatically. That's because with flat student enrollment, the Proposition 98 guarantee of 39 percent of the budget for education will create a new, larger funding base. The Legislative Analyst's Office projects that within five years the K-12 education system will get about $5.9 billion in permanent, new funding.

Today's education budget is $38.5 billion so that new money is significant. So is the choice it presents. California can fritter away that money – or do something big with it. We can let it get eaten up in pay raises – or we can plan now to ensure that we get improvements.

As an LAO slide aptly notes: "New monies offer opportunity to buy reform. But new monies used in the same ways might result in no improvement." That's the challenge ahead for Schwarzenegger and legislators.

We'd like to see the governor and Legislature use 2008 to set an education road map – where we want to be and how we want to get there – with benchmarks for Year 1, Year 2, Year 3, Year 4 and Year 5.

Data should be the Year 1 priority. California has dragged its feet in tracking performance, programs and resources. We need to know what's working and what's not. Get the data piece passed and funded.
Then rethink how we distribute money to schools. As last year's research package, "Getting Down to Facts," noted, California needs radical change in the "irrational" and "inflexible" way it distributes money to schools. In a year without much money, an easy reform would be to give local school districts broader flexibility in how to spend money – getting rid of so-called required, "categorical" spending.

Other areas with broad support include expanding preschool and career-technical options (Schwarzenegger's real passion and an area where he could make a difference), addressing teacher quality, reducing dropout rates, dealing with schools and districts that haven't met performance targets for five years in a row.

Schwarzenegger learned from his 2005 "Year of Confrontation" how not to get things done. In 2006 and 2007 he tried inclusion and bringing people together. He wants to follow that model for the 2008 Year of Education: "Let everyone be included so that everyone feels like they are part of the changes rather than fighting them and attacking them."

Californians should hold out for true reform, not just tweaks at the edges – and that means setting a bold course, with a road map that tracks year-by-year performance.

The timing is right, and California ought not let the opportunity pass.