



The Web Site of The Sacramento Bee

This story is taken from [Sacbee](#) / [Politics](#) / [California Politics](#).

---

## Dan Walters: 2 wrongs make right in politics?

**By Dan Walters - Bee Columnist**

**Published 12:00 am PDT Sunday, May 13, 2007**

If we've established one thing about California politics over the last couple of decades, it is that there's no such thing as self-evident virtue.

We may yearn for politicians to do the right thing simply because it's the right thing, but recent history has demonstrated that for the most part, they'll act only if sufficient outside pressure is applied to overcome the inherent inertia of politics.

A very good example is the recent agreement that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and legislative leaders forged on building new prisons to ease severe inmate overcrowding only after a federal judge seized control of prison health care and threatened to take over the entire prison system.

If there is one policy area in which self-evident virtue should -- but doesn't -- prevail, it is in education, the most expensive state government activity, and certainly the most important from a societal standpoint. But power politics are just as prevalent in the schools as in any other field, as exemplified by two aspects of education that have often been spotlighted in this space: vocational education and community colleges.

The former, now renamed career and technical education, or CTE, has been sorely neglected for years as politicians and educators pursued the wholly illogical and unrealistic, if politically popular, notion that every high school student is destined to attend a four-year college and hold a white-collar job. The decline of CTE undoubtedly has contributed to the state's shameful high school dropout rate and has deprived California and its economy of the skilled blue-collar workers, from auto mechanics to electricians, needed to function.

Schwarzenegger has been a CTE champion, and that has given job-related education a political boost, but advocates are worried that once he leaves the governorship, it will decline again. So they are trying to seize the moment by enacting legislation to give CTE more permanence, the centerpiece of which is Senate Bill 672 by Sen. Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch, which would require high school students, as a condition of graduation, to take two CTE courses.

The bill's backers believe that making CTE a requirement, placing it on the same plane as college prep classes, would compel otherwise indifferent politicians and educators to give it the attention and resources it deserves. They may be correct, but forcing all students to take vocational classes has the same one-size-fits-all flaw as requiring all students to pass college prep classes regardless of their interests or aptitudes. Students come in all varieties. To the extent possible, we should be tailoring their educations to their unique attributes, whatever they may be.

Community colleges are cost-efficient vehicles -- for both taxpayers and students -- that deserve first-rank priority for education funds but, like CTE, have been neglected by politicians and educators obsessed with every student obtaining a four-year college degree. Schwarzenegger has also been a community college champion, but looking past his tenure, the system's advocates have qualified a measure for the Feb. 5 primary election ballot that would elevate its constitutional status and give it stronger guarantees of state financing.

The measure's backers believe that with other claimants for funds, including K-12 education and prisons, wielding political muscle, they have no choice but to play the same game or continue to be the poor relations of public education. They may be correct as well, but their measure exacerbates an increasingly common practice of budgeting by ballot measure that generates chronic, multibillion-dollar deficits year after year.

Do two wrongs make a right? In California politics, doing the wrong thing may be the only way to accomplish the right thing.

Go to: [Sacbee](#) / [Back to story](#)

---

This article is protected by copyright and should not be printed or distributed for anything except personal use.  
The Sacramento Bee, 2100 Q St., P.O. Box 15779, Sacramento, CA 95852  
Phone: (916) 321-1000

Copyright © The Sacramento Bee