



The Web Site of The Sacramento Bee

Peter Schrag: Why help children when you can punish adults?
Wednesday, March 7, 2007

You could have predicted it. As soon as someone in the Capitol proposes something hopeful -- in this case investing a little extra money in the future of California's children -- the party of fear rises up.

It happened again last week: Some 48 hours after Sen. Darrell Steinberg of Sacramento, a Democrat, and Sen. Bob Dutton, a Rancho Cucamonga Republican, proposed that the state provide the beginning of a savings account to every California newborn, Dutton's fellow Republicans put so much heat on him that he bailed out.

The official explanation was that the state can't afford it. But the bigger driver appears to be the fulmination of right-wing talkers and other nativists against providing help to the American-born (citizen) children of illegal immigrants.

How dumb. Those kids, a minority of newborns, are going to be here regardless.

Under the plan, the state would put \$500 into a tax exempt, interest-bearing account from which money could be withdrawn only after the individual turns 18: for education, buying a home or to start a retirement account.

The plan, embodied in Senate Bill 752, sees the \$500 as seed money to encourage relatives to contribute to the account. Its sponsors calculate that with an additional \$50 monthly from parents -- a total of \$10,800 -- the account would be worth roughly \$17,500 in 18 years.

In an environment in which the Legislature generates lots of screwball ideas -- prohibitions against spanking little kids, mandatory neutering of pets, laws requiring fluorescent light bulbs (and that's just in the last month) -- Senate Bill 752 would be a real innovation.

It's hardly the all-purpose solution in giving California kids a better start or in countering the dangerously inadequate savings rate of Americans. Without that parental contribution, the account would be worth less than \$1,300 when the child reaches college age. That's today's cost of one semester's tuition at a California State University.

More important, should the state be handing \$500 to those already born with silver spoons in their mouths? In an ideal (nonpolitical) world, the total cost of the program, roughly \$270 million a year, would be concentrated on the neediest, and especially the 20 percent or so born into families below the poverty line.

In addition to the bite-your-nose-to-spite-your-face argument against helping kids of illegal immigrants, there was the complaint from Republican Sen. George Runner, co-author with his

wife, Sharon, of Jessica's Law, which, among other things, adds possession of child pornography to the list of possible third-strike felonies for which people can be incarcerated for life.

How could the state create those savings accounts, he said to Bee reporter Jim Sanders, when it can't even afford to lock up all its dangerous criminals?

When hope raises its timid head, punishment beats it down.

Of course, if the state wanted, it could afford both the kids and the slammers, assuming we really need more cells, which are overstuffed in large part because the party of fear has worked so hard to add new offenses and lengthen mandatory sentences.

In the right districts, being "tough on crime" is politically cheap. No one notices that stuffed prisons cost the taxpayers \$41,574 a year per convict -- some \$9 billion this year. That's roughly what the state pays for the University of California and the California State University combined.

"I will continue to fight to ensure that (California's three strikes law) is not weakened," Runner has said, "and to try to speed up death penalty sentences."

Maybe that's the way to reduce overcrowding.

Despite contrary claims, there's no evidence that three strikes, enacted in 1994, has contributed in any significant way to a declining crime rate (which, in any case, started down before three strikes was passed). But there's ample evidence that a lot of able California students don't go to college -- and that others drop out -- because they can't afford it.

Anyway you look at it, SB 752 is a modest proposal. But it could be the start of a promising direction for the state, not least because it could become the first serious state investment in its young that goes beyond the formal institutions of education and that encourages additional saving.

Over the years, many have argued that even in supporting training and education, a lot more of the state's money should go directly to individuals to spend on any of hundreds of training programs and career opportunities, not just to colleges or universities. Ideally, shouldn't this bill also allow its beneficiaries to use their accounts to invest in small businesses, whether it's a computer consulting service, a welding shop, a hip-hop band or a corner taqueria? It could open doors to many other opportunities.

But unless it gets some Republican support, SB 752 won't go anywhere. When the highest priorities of a major political party are punishing the minority of Americans who happen to be kids of illegal immigrants and throwing more people in jail, hope goes to the back of the bus.