

## A state budget reality check

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Speaking at a conference at UC Berkeley over the weekend, state Treasurer Bill Lockyer went further than some of his counterparts have been willing to go in explaining the crisis that confronts California. Without quick action to shore up the state's balance sheet, he said, California could soon be forced to issue IOUs or defer tax refunds. Then he dropped a bomb: Unless voters agree to the extension of temporary car, income and sales taxes, the state would be so short of money that it might have to whack more than six weeks off the K-12 school year.

That pronouncement got shockingly little attention. Ignored by television, relegated to the back pages — if any — in the state's newspapers, it faded softly into the complicated debate over how bad this situation really is. In fact, even among Californians suffering budget-crisis fatigue, Lockyer's prediction should strike fear.

To be clear, he wasn't saying it would have to happen that way; that's just one scenario. If revenues aren't raised, he told *The Times*, it would take 31% in across-the-board spending cuts to balance the state budget. That would mean an \$11-billion cut for schools, which could be achieved in many ways — by increasing class sizes, for example, or cutting administrative or custodial employees, or revising the calendar, or some combination. But if it were done solely by shortening the school year, it would mean a loss of six to eight weeks.

Imagine, for a moment, the consequences of that. Start with the idea of educating California's children less — this in a state that already bemoans its fall from educational excellence. Inadequate investment has already doomed too many young Californians to lives less than they deserved; cutting back on education for this generation would only deepen the tragedy. Then there are the near-term costs: Children who aren't in school need supervision. Parents already strapped for cash would have to take time off from work — or let their kids roam free.

The budget negotiations in Sacramento are a work in progress, and each side is proceeding with care at the moment. But the comments by Lockyer, who acknowledged in his talk that he "was not supposed to be saying any of this," should remind all who are paying attention precisely how dire the crisis is. This is not a moment for Democrats to protect their constituencies and Republicans to circle their wagons against new taxes. Each side must give, and give a lot, for this state to avoid a historic calamity.

If legislators don't recognize the gravity of this situation, they are living an illusion. Now is the time for them to deliver, or to be held responsible for failure.