Opinion: A no vote on Prop. 30 would be ‘horrific’

By Vicki Barber

Driving around our expansive El Dorado County – sprawling from the valley up through the foothills and forests to Lake Tahoe – I am constantly amazed at the diversity and beauty of the terrain.

I am equally impressed by the diversity of our school districts.

Vicki Barber

Yet after a quarter century of striving to improve the quality of education in both large and small, urban and deeply rural districts, I am feeling a growing concern – and personal sadness – about our local schools and the future of education in our communities.

My primary concern is not just about the pivotal Proposition 30 facing state voters in the Nov. 6 election but from a cumulative erosion of funding for schools in the past five years.

In El Dorado County our 12 local elementary districts, two unified districts and union high school district have been forced to cut about 20 percent from their annual budgets – about $22 million in real-world dollars. Numerous programs

have had to be curtailed or canceled, with talented teachers and staff being laid off.

Amazingly, our schools have been able to sustain a solid performance level of 81 percent, despite cutback upon cutback. I credit the professionalism and dedication of our teaching, administrative and support staffs, as well as involved parents in our schools.

However, in my conversations with our professionals, I sense that the extra sacrifices most have made to sustain quality have taken a personal toll. The cuts are creating a level of discouragement and fatigue that begins to approach burnout for some.

There are two types of cuts: direct reductions in funding due to the multi-billion-dollar statewide budget deficit, and "deferred" payments – which amount to the same thing (cutting people and programs) locally.

Then comes this year's blow (if voters reject Prop. 30): By the end of the school year, our districts must make another drastic cut of about 10 percent, or about $455 per student on a basis of $5,000 per student from the state. This would amount to several million more dollars.

While I am not advocating on behalf of Proposition 30, I feel it is my responsibility to warn of the immediate and longer-term impacts of its failure – impacts that will directly impact our 30,000 students, 6,500 professionals and support staff, and the overall quality of the education we provide our children.

Based on my lifetime of experience in education, including a quarter century with the El Dorado County Office of Education in budgeting, special services and as superintendent, last month I said publicly that the impacts would be "horrific." I stand by that professional assessment.

It is demoralizing to those of us who have spent our careers trying to provide quality education for children, and now we're dismantling programs that make a real difference.

I am not alone in my concern and sadness at witnessing the erosion of the quality educational programs I have spent a career helping build. It is what I hear from officials in our local districts, from colleagues statewide, from teaching and support staff throughout our schools, and even from within the County Office of Education itself.

Deputy Superintendent Jeremy Meyers, in charge of educational services and programs, believes that we are quite literally at a "tipping point" where quality cannot be sustained despite the dedication and best efforts of our staff. He notes that the cutbacks are not only increasing class sizes and reducing programs but are actually ending the careers of some teachers.

He's right. We are seeing the brightest, our youngest folks who are coming into the profession at a time when we're then saying to them, "We can't continue," as we hand them layoff notices under the last-in-first-out seniority rule.

The loss of another 10 percent in per student funding, on top of the deep cuts already made, could mean shortening the school year by three full weeks.

And despite the rhetoric of politicians on the importance of education to America, do we really believe – in comparison to other countries and the world economy – that we want our kids in the United States to receive three weeks less of school?

Vicki Barber is superintendent of schools for El Dorado County.