Many moons ago, I went to California public schools, then on to a community college and later got my degree from a state university. And I can tell you we had some complaints.

They weren't using enough turf builder on the outfield grass. The band instruments had been around a few years. And the San Jose State student newspaper only published five days a week.

The problems are a little different these days.

My daughter attends elementary school in Los Angeles Unified, which has just sent out 11,700 layoff notices in the latest round of miserable news.

Eleven-thousand seven-hundred.

Even if the actual cuts fall way below that number, as expected, there'll be plenty of pain to go around. Art, physical education, early childhood education and adult education — among many other things — are on the chopping block at schools around the state.

I had it good as a kid and didn't even know it. State leaders believed, back when I went to California schools, that a quality, affordable education for everyone was not just a civic virtue but an economic no-brainer.

Today, the Golden State is making every effort to destroy its own best traditions. At every level of public education, from elementary school to graduate school, constant budget cuts are decimating once-great institutions and devaluing our greatest resource — eager young minds.

Last week, California State University students marched on Sacramento to protest the devastating effects of a 42% decline in state funding over the last decade. Tuition and
fees have nearly tripled in that time, even though students are getting less for their money.

I was in the Bay Area recently and caught this headline in the Contra Costa Times:

"Believe it: Harvard cheaper than Cal State."

Well, certainly not if you go by the sticker prices for tuition, room and board. But on Harvard's website, there's a calculator that says a family of four with a $130,000 annual income could qualify for as much as a $39,750 scholarship for the undergrad program. So instead of $56,750 for freshman tuition, room and board at Harvard, the bill would come to $17,000.

At Cal State L.A., the cost of tuition, room board and other fees is $21,335 per year, and that same family of four making $130,000 wouldn't qualify for aid, according to the calculator.

"I am seeing families more open to looking at alternatives out of state," said Audrey Kahane, a West Hills consultant who works with families and kids on college admissions.

One of her clients, the Sigel family, just opted out of California. Jeff Sigel told me his daughter, Molly, is completing her first year of college in Israel but plans to return home to the U.S. for her sophomore year.

"She's been accepted at UC Santa Cruz and San Diego State," said the father, but his daughter will instead go to the State University of New York at Binghamton. It will cost more than San Diego and less than Santa Cruz, he said, but there was another major financial factor in the decision.

"It seems more likely she will graduate on time in Binghamton," Sigel said, because drastic cuts in course offerings are making it harder for California students to finish in four years.

On the Cal State L.A. campus Monday afternoon, sophomore Andres Valdez told me he scrambled to get into a critical thinking class required for his major, only to see the class canceled.

Juan Garcia, who works by day and takes evening classes, said he couldn't get into an anthropology class he needs for his master's degree. "I may have to extend my stay here," he said, even as tuition and fees keep going up.

Community colleges, meanwhile, were already reeling from a $415-million cut this year when another $149-million cut was tacked on last month. L.A. City College President Jamillah Moore told me the school's budget was $67 million in 2007, it's down to $53 million now, and she's got to get it down to $50 million by July 1.

"We're turning students away altogether," said Lawrence Bradford, vice president for
Bradford handed me a business card he had printed at his own expense, and at one point he asked Ted Segal, a counselor, if the office printer was working. No, said Segal. They'd run out of replacement parts, and it was still out of order.

Class sizes have gone from 25 to 50 in some cases, Bradford said, to help manage costs. And many students have been forced to hang on an extra year or two, while managing jobs and families, as they wait for classes to open up.

"It's really painful to have students who know what they want to do, and we can't help them," Bradford said.

I wouldn't say the remedies are simple, but I will say this:

You cannot fix any of this in a state more inclined to build prisons than schools, despite projections of a huge shortage of college-educated workers by 2025. You can't fix it when you're the only major oil-producing state with no excise tax, and you refuse to correct the huge property tax advantage Proposition 13 extended to corporations. You can't fix it without modest concessions from public employees, including teachers, on pensions and benefits.

And you certainly can't fix it with three competing and unimaginative tax-increase proposals — one by Gov. Jerry Brown — that would restore some school funding, but are likely to do each other in come November.

We used to be able to brag about our schools, and maybe we took quality for granted. That's all behind us now, and even mediocrity is fading from sight in the rearview mirror.

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