

State Supt. Jack O'Connell
EdSource Forum
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Remarks as Prepared

Good afternoon.

It is a pleasure to stand before you today during what I hope will be the beginning of an era for profound change for education, both here in California and across the country.

You may be asking yourselves about the source from which this enthusiastic optimism is derived, and to find the answer you need not look any further than last November, when nearly 70 million Americans cast a vote for our new president, Barack Obama. This historic event is significant in that it resulted in the election of our nation's first African American president, but it is also significant given the strong undercurrents for a push to change that were exhibited by Americans throughout this election, from the primaries all the way to election night.

But this desire for change is not limited to foreign relations, nor to our energy and environmental policies, nor our economic policies.

President Obama won a mandate for change that has placed him in a position to cause a massive shift in the way our government operates and in the manner in which it serves the needs of its citizens.

And make no mistake about it: education is, without question, at the forefront of this monumental change movement.

The new Administration is already making good on this commitment to education in the efficient and cooperative way it has dealt with states, including California, that are eager to receive monies from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).

California is slated to receive roughly \$8 billion in stimulus funds for K-12 education, and the money has already started coming in, as just a few days ago I announced that the U.S. Department of Education already awarded California an estimated \$634 million for IDEA and \$564 million for Title I programs in the first disbursement of funds from ARRA.

And there's much more on the way.

In just the first few months of this Administration, I can easily and confidently say that we have seen a dramatic shift in the willingness of this White House to be a partner to states – this is a welcome difference from the previous Administration.

But this is not the only change I am talking about.

A couple of weeks ago, I had the privilege of meeting with both President Obama and his Education Secretary Arne Duncan about the stimulus plan and the Obama Administration's goals for reform.

The overall impression I came away with was that this Administration is looking for bold action and is ready to change what needs changing, improve on what needs improving, and ensure that this nation's children really are receiving the high quality education they need and deserve in order to become fully productive citizens in the 21st century.

While some of the changes the Administration seeks are creating suspicion, or could prove to be lightning rods for controversy, it is imperative that we in California not allow our reluctance to take on these challenges stifle the opportunity to participate in a new era for education in this country, to undertake an evolution of the system we operate.

California cannot afford to miss out on being a player in this process.

At this point, you may be asking yourselves: where does this change in education policy begin?

Well the administration has called out four key areas upon which they want states to focus:

- Adopting internationally benchmarked standards and assessments that better prepare students for college and a career;
- Building high-quality data systems that track students' academic careers, making it possible to tell which teachers, programs and schools are effective;
- Recruiting more high-quality educators to underperforming schools, as well as to subjects like math and science; and
- Supporting effective strategies to turn around underperforming schools.

These areas are critical for the endeavor's ultimate success and they contain difficult political landmines, but we as a state have navigated these kinds of issues successfully before. It is imperative that we enter the arena and use this unprecedented opportunity to make long overdue investments and consider reforms many thought would not be possible.

And the place for us to begin this conversation is in an area in which California has served as an established leader for some time now: standards.

I am proud, as all of you should be, that California purposely set the bar high for what our children should know and be able to do, and we have never wavered from that commitment. We have been faithful, but it is time for a check up to rededicate and reinvigorate our high standards.

It is most important for us to re-up our standards in light of increasing global interactions and ensure that what we ask of our K-12 students is directly aligned with the expectations of postsecondary education and the needs of the global business community.

Make no mistake my friends, the call for state-driven, commonly-accepted national standards is gaining momentum and we can either be a leader in the conversation and work to ensure the results closely align to our current standards or we can stand on the sidelines and watch it happen to us. I strongly advocate for the former and hope you will too.

In addition, while we pride ourselves on high, rigorous standards, we also have to acknowledge that they are not perfect and evolving them is healthy. In particular, I'm talking about the issue I hear about most from my friends in the field – that our standards are, as some say, “a mile wide, but only an inch deep.” I think it would be helpful to focus more on the depth of knowledge needed in order to fully engage both students and teachers in the learning process in a way that sees both parties benefit and helps to better prepare students for success in the economy of the 21st century.

In addition, it is incumbent on us to show national leadership in ensuring any new development of standards includes a fundamental grounding in the English language development necessary for English Language Learners to succeed. I have spoken often of the imperative to close the achievement gap, but we will not close it until we find ways to bring all of our children up to the same high learning levels.

The final part of the standards discussion called for by President Obama relates to assessments. When we talk about preparing our kids for the future, we are no longer only talking about their future productivity in California's economy, or the nation's economy, but the global economy. So, it begs the question: are we comprehensively assessing our students' knowledge and skills in a way that will give them the best possible shot at success in the hypercompetitive global economy? While I am the author of the high school exit exam and a steadfast supporter of our current assessment system, I also realize that it makes sense to invest in developing measures of assessment so we can get a more robust, but equally valid, indication of the breadth of student learning.

We must also take a close look at the issue of the equity of effective teachers. Are our teachers getting the training, mentoring, and professional development that fully equips them to address the needs of each and ever one of California's

6.3 million students? Are they getting sufficient, consistent support for their work? Our educators must possess the skills to help any child, from any background, learn to his or her full potential. And we also must ensure that our best teachers are equitably placed among our student population. This may mean, as Secretary Duncan points out, opening our minds to creative approaches to recruiting and compensating those teaching our most needy students. If we are going to do right by our kids and take advantage of this wave of change, then everything must be on the table, and we need to bring both teachers and management to that table to come up with creative solutions that benefit all students.

Done wrong, these are third rails. Done right, in partnership with all the professionals involved in teaching and learning, we can objectively engage in the consideration of all possible options.

We also cannot say we have done our job on school reform if we do not dedicate time and energy to improving the strategies we use to try to turn around our lowest-performing schools.

While I can proudly tell you that overall our accountability reports show our schools are making real progress and that more students in California are meeting the challenge of higher expectations, there are still far too many schools and far too many students who are significantly below proficient. Of course, the proficiency bar is an ever higher target, but at the end of the day, our job is to help each and every student learn to his or her full potential and that each student has the capacity to meet our high standards.

So we must target our efforts and our resources more effectively to help these struggling schools improve. We cannot let them fail, hit them with sanctions, and sit on the sidelines. This Administration has made a clear commitment that it will support states' efforts to find and use effective strategies that are making a difference in kids' lives, a focus I agree with completely.

The final area for change we must address is data. President Obama and his team have sent a clear signal of their intention to help states create effective educational data systems to improve instruction and enhance accountability.

In this area, I am pleased to say that we have an excellent framework to guide our plans. As many of you know, two years ago, I began the process of exploring how we can improve and expand California's educational data collection systems. Through the generosity of the Gates and Hewlett Foundations, we were able to contract with McKinsey and Company, which after exhaustive research, produced a report that outlines how California can build a truly world class educational data system. I am also pleased to say that there has been broad agreement among education advocates around the principles for improving California's data system included in this report. Principles such as the fact that

data is the foundation for a system of continuous improvement; if we develop the data system we need; it will help guide us to continually improve our education system.

Because after all, the real promise of data is not better sanctions, but better assistance to improve teaching and learning.

As a result, I feel very optimistic that we will be eligible for the federal dollars available to states on a competitive basis to start the process of implementing McKinsey's recommendations.

This certainly is an ambitious agenda for change, but it is long overdue and it is entirely relevant.

It is also a national agenda. In order to be a leader in these conversations we are going to have to reach outside of our comfort zone. We are going to have to partner with other states, with districts and with schools. We are going to have to work collaboratively and comprehensively. We are going to have to focus on students.

Our nation is at a crossroads culturally and economically, but Americans have come together and issued their own mandate for change that I know President Obama will live up to.

We must keep an open mind and open hearts – we must put our differences aside and work together, because this is not your agenda or my agenda...or even the President's agenda...this is an agenda for our students and an agenda for the future.

Thank you.