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PLANNING FOR A COHERENT EDUCATION SYSTEM

California Senator Dede Alpert*

In 1999, the California Legislature undertook a very ambitious effort to draft a new education master plan that would encompass the entire education system in California.¹ Education is, and always has been, a vital interest of our state. It provides Californians with the capacity, knowledge, and skills to sustain our system of government, to foster a thriving and resilient economy, and provides the foundation for a harmonious society. Today, students require the skills to continue learning throughout their lives, and they bring increasingly diverse learning needs to each classroom. To be responsive to Californian's needs, and by extension, the diverse learning needs of all students, California must have a comprehensive, coherent, and flexible education system in which all levels, from preschool to postsecondary education, are aligned and coordinated as a single integrated system.

California's postsecondary education system has benefited from a Master Plan for Higher Education since 1960.² It has provided a policy framework in which public colleges and universities have achieved great distinction in providing broad access to postsecondary education, high quality instruction, and outstanding research that has contributed to both the world's storehouse of knowledge and to California's economy. These achievements were possible because of the differentiated missions assigned to the three public sectors of postsecondary education (the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California), the stable policy

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1. See S.C.R. 29, 106th Leg. (Ca. 1999).

2. See CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, CALIFORNIA STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, A MASTER PLAN FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA, 1960-1975 (1960).

environment in which the sectors thrived, and the state's commitment to finance the vision contained in that Master Plan.

In contrast to postsecondary education, California's public school system has not enjoyed such stability and clarity of expectations. Like many states, California has introduced numerous major reforms aimed at improving the performance of public schools in preparing students for a full range of life options after high school. The frequency of these reforms has made it difficult to determine the extent to which any of them have achieved their intended purposes, as few were allowed to be in place long enough to evaluate before new, sometimes conflicting, reforms were introduced. Efforts to achieve the desired level of excellence in public schools have been further complicated by several factors. Perhaps the most important of these factors is California's changing demography. Every year since 1950, California's population has grown between 400,000 to 600,000 people,³ generating tremendous pressure for new education expenditures and the production of many more qualified teachers. In addition, the composition of this population growth has been extremely diverse, resulting in California being the first state in the contiguous United States to have no single racial or ethnic group representing 50% of the population.⁴

Another factor impacting education is the fluctuation in the economy. Increasingly, California job opportunities are split between a workforce that has the ability to manage information and ideas -high-wage jobs- and service-oriented tasks - primarily low-wage jobs. Generally, access to the former is restricted to those who have completed a certain level of education beyond high school, while access to the latter is filled by the majority of our population - those who have not excelled academically or were not well-served by our education system. Not surprisingly, many students that have not been well-served come from low-income and immigrant families.⁵ They represent a

3. See California Department of Finance, Demographic Research Unit website, AVAILABLE AT <http://www.dof.ca.gov/HTML/DEMOGRAP/Druhpar.htm> (May 25, 2003).

4. See *id.*

5. See generally CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE INDEX (API), available at <http://api.cde.ca.gov> (last visited May 25, 2003) and CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, CALIFORNIA BASIC EDUCATION DATA SYSTEM (CBEDS) FILES, available at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/demographics/files/cbedshome.htm> (last visited May 25, 2003).

growing population in California's public schools and thus, to succeed in serving California, our goal is to ensure that all students have real opportunities for a quality of life that many take for granted. Accordingly, the California Legislature has worked hard to implement a plan to address a number of major issues facing California's public school system.

The Joint Committee to Develop a Master Plan for Education has tried to address a number of major issues that have been documented as impediments to the success of our educational system: considerable educational disparities, especially for children living in poverty and for students of color; large enrollment growth; and fragmented governance and the attendant lack of accountability.⁶

The California Master Plan for Education, formally adopted in August 2002, incorporates the best ideas and suggestions of thousands of Californians and the research of education professionals from throughout the country,⁷ some of whom summarize their research in this symposium issue of the Santa Clara Law Review. The Plan puts forward a bold, but simple vision that provides a clear, long-term focus for developing an education system that is available to *every* Californian and that emphasizes learners' needs and outcomes:

California will develop and maintain a coherent system of first-rate schools, colleges, and universities that prepares all students for learning and for transition to and success in a successive level of education, the workplace, and society at large, and that is fully responsive to the changing needs of our state and our people.⁸

In keeping with this vision, California legislators, with the advice of thousands of Californians, have attempted to identify ways in which state education systems can become more coherent, or "seamless," in providing students with learning experiences that are free of educational and bureaucratic impediments and instilling in them a continuing curiosity and thirst for knowledge. A major focus of these efforts has been ensuring

6. See generally Joint Committee to Develop a Master Plan for Education website, at <http://www.sen.ca.gov/masterplan> (last visited May 25, 2003) [hereinafter Joint Committee].

7. See JOINT COMMITTEE TO DEVELOP A MASTER PLAN FOR EDUCATION, CALIFORNIA MASTER PLAN FOR EDUCATION (2002), available at <http://www.sen.ca.gov/masterplan/020909THEMASTERPLANLINKS.HTML> (last visited May 25, 2003) [hereinafter MASTER PLAN 2002].

8. *Id.*

equity in the distribution of resources and opportunities necessary to provide a high-quality education to every student, irrespective of his or her circumstances.⁹ Drafters have sought to make the critical evolution from *access* to *success*, by focusing greater attention on the academic achievement and career preparation of all students, rather than on institutional prerogatives.

Quality education, properly defined, requires attention to teaching *and* learning. The context within which teaching and learning are expected to coexist is critically important as it has a significant impact on the education process. California's Master Plan asserts that students and their families have a right to expect more than simply a seat in a classroom.¹⁰ Students also are entitled to be taught by competent, fully qualified faculty; to receive a clear statement of what they are expected to know and be able to do at every educational level; to receive support and supplemental educational services needed to meet those expectations; to receive counseling and academic advising to assist them in successful educational progress; and to have their education take place in safe, well-maintained facilities.

At the same time, students have an obligation to participate in their own learning. They are expected to attend classes regularly and participate in the educational opportunities that are provided, commit to the level of effort needed to succeed, and to contribute to maintaining a safe, positive educational environment.

In addition, education professionals, parents, policy makers, and employers have an obligation to contribute to an environment that encourages and supports quality teaching and learning, by ensuring that teachers have the tools to be effective in meeting their instructional responsibilities; that students receive the encouragement and support at home to continuously develop their learning skills; that adequate fiscal resources are provided to every school, college, and university to support their educational programs; and that students have access to knowledge and opportunities to learn ways in which they can apply their knowledge and skills in the workplace.

ELIMINATING INEQUALITY IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Although some structural problems exist that impact Cali-

9. See *id.* 133-35.

10. See *id.* 14-18.

fornia's public education system as a whole, there is a significant chasm among schools in terms of resource distribution and student achievement.¹¹ While aggregate measures of student performance fail to meet the desired expectations, the system provides an excellent education to a large proportion of students, but fails miserably for others. The California Legislature's Master Plan effort was driven by a commitment to eliminate those inequities.¹² Fortunately, the Master Plan was developed at a time when the state was beginning to gather credible data on resource distribution and national scholars began recognizing ways to close the achievement gap among students.

A substantial number of leading researchers provided California with the necessary tools to develop the Master Plan for Education. The Master Plan is a reflection of the work and contributions of a number of prominent researchers, including Jeannie Oakes, Presidential Professor and Director of Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, UCLA; Margaret Gaston, Co-Director of the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning; Linda Darling-Hammond, Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education at Stanford University; John Augenblick, President, Augenblick & Meyers, Inc.; Patricia Gandara, Co-Director of Policy Analysis for California Education; John Sonstelie, Senior Fellow, Public Policy Institute of California; and others who have focused on resource inequities in schools.

Research demonstrates that schools' most influential factor in promoting student learning is the availability of highly qualified teachers.¹³ For too many years, California has been experiencing a shortage of qualified teachers, despite intensive efforts to attract teachers to the profession and foster conditions that will keep them in the classroom. The demographic pressures of growth in California have generated a strong demand for new teachers over the next decade. This need is exacerbated by California's decision to reduce class sizes in kindergarten through third grades, teacher turnover, and the estimated retirement of

11. See Joint Committee, *supra* note 6.

12. See *id.*

13. See generally GENE BOTTOMS, ET AL, SOUTHERN REGIONAL EDUCATION BOARD, THE 2000 HIGH SCHOOLS THAT WORK ASSESSMENT: IMPROVING URBAN HIGH SCHOOLS (2001); LINDA DARLING-HAMMOND ET AL., NAT'L COMM'N ON TEACHING AND AMERICA'S FUTURE, DOING WHAT MATTERS MOST: INVESTING IN QUALITY TEACHING (1997); GANDARA, PATRICIA & JULIE MAXWELL-JOLLY, THE CENTER FOR THE FUTURE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING, PREPARING TEACHERS FOR DIVERSITY: A DILEMMA OF QUALITY AND QUANTITY (2000).

up to one-third of the existing teacher's workforce.¹⁴ Some estimates show that California will require well over 200,000 new teachers over the course of the next decade,¹⁵ and responding to this need represents one of the greatest challenges facing the state in its effort to ensure that all students are taught by qualified teachers. But generating sufficient numbers of teachers is only part of the challenge.

Student achievement data in California schools reveal that schools with the highest student achievement scores have the greatest number of qualified and most experienced teachers, while schools with the lowest student achievement scores have the greatest proportion of unqualified, under-prepared, and least experienced teachers. Rectifying this inequitable distribution of qualified teachers in our schools is as important, if not more important, than producing larger numbers of qualified teachers. California must find new ways to attract and retain more qualified and experienced teachers to its lowest performing schools if it is to make progress in eliminating the achievement gap between students from low-income families and their more affluent peers, and between English language learners and students who are already proficient in the use of the English language.

As the research underlying *Williams v. State of California*¹⁶ makes abundantly clear, California's students do not enjoy equitable educational environments. Too many students are required to attend schools in which buildings are not well maintained, classrooms are either too hot in the summer or too cold in the winter, and essential curricular and instructional support materials are not available in adequate quantities, if they are available at all.¹⁷ In such circumstances, it is all too easy for students to conclude that they are not valued and to psychologically or physically drop out of the education process. Research-

14. See CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, CALIFORNIA BASIC EDUCATION DATA SYSTEM (CBEDS) FILES, *supra* note 5.

15. The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning both estimate that California will need to hire more than 200,000 additional teachers from 2002-03 to 2010-11. See generally California Commission on Teacher Credentialing website, at <http://www.ctc.ca.gov> (last visited May 25, 2003); The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning website, at <http://www.cftl.org/home.html> (last visited May 25, 2003).

16. *Williams v. State of California*, S.F. Superior Court (No. 312236)

17. See First Amended Complaint for Injunctive and Declaratory Relief, *Williams, et al. v. California* (No. 312236).

ers refer to these conditions as “inequitable opportunities for teaching and learning” that adversely impact student achievement and exclude students from a range of life options.¹⁸ California’s constitutional guarantee of free access to public school and compulsory attendance laws combine to underscore the responsibility of the state to find effective ways to address this inequity. This task is not something that can be achieved by state policymakers alone; it requires a collaborative effort by state, local, and business interests. California’s Master Plan for Education seeks to define complementary responsibilities and assign authority between various stakeholder groups to increase the likelihood that we make steady progress in eliminating these inequities in teaching and learning opportunities.¹⁹

The twenty-year vision of the Master Plan points California in the direction of allocating significantly more educational resources to our schools, colleges, and universities.²⁰ Recognizing that the Plan’s ambitious goals will take many years to achieve, our commitment to closing the resource and achievement gaps is demonstrated by the Plan’s repeatedly bringing those additional resources to schools serving children living in poverty, and otherwise low-performing schools, as the first priority within its staged implementation.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR STUDENT LEARNING

California’s decision to focus on learners is a departure from its historical practice of focusing on institutions and mission differentiation. The Joint Committee to Develop a Master Plan for Education envisions an education system in which student achievement will not be left to chance or “innate” intelligence. It will not tolerate schools sorting students into tracks in which less is expected of – or provided to – some students than others, and categorically rejects the notion that student achievement must be distributed along a bell curve.²¹ This goal requires an education system that holds itself collectively accountable for the achievement of all students at or above a common standard; that collects and analyzes data regularly to evaluate the effec-

18. See JOINT COMMITTEE TO DEVELOP A MASTER PLAN FOR EDUCATION, KINDERGARTEN THROUGH UNIVERSITY, STUDENT LEARNING WORKING GROUP FINAL REPORT (Feb. 2002).

19. See MASTER PLAN 2002, *supra* note 7, at 91-99.

20. See *id.* 128-131.

21. See Joint Committee, *supra* note 6.

tiveness of its education providers; that directs resources to low performing schools, colleges, and universities to build capacity for improved performance; and that allows flexibility in approaches taken by education institutions to achieve desired outcomes for students.

California has already adopted rigorous academic content standards, defining the first elements of what every student should be taught and master. To emphasize again, it is both important and challenging to ensure that every student is taught by qualified faculty, in safe and well maintained facilities, led by qualified administrators who can provide teachers with the tools and environment they need to be effective in and out of the classroom. Equally important is sharing data among education personnel regarding student achievement for the purpose of better aligning courses and assessments, modifying course content and practices as necessary to respond to students' needs, and monitoring student achievement as they progress through the education continuum.

Also, it is important for California to make progress in meeting the challenge of identifying what is an adequate base of financing to ensure that all schools, colleges, and universities can provide a quality educational experience. The type of coherent education system envisioned in the Master Plan will require additional investment, but determining how much more is needed is difficult without a better understanding of the cost of those education components that researchers say matter most. California has authorized the creation of a Quality Education Commission, comprised of legislators and education experts, to develop a model for financing public schools in the state and recommend the level of education investment that is deemed adequate for ensuring quality in all public schools.²² The model will recognize that different expenditure levels may be warranted for schools serving higher proportions of special need students than others to ensure that those students receive the support they need to meet learning expectations for all students.

SUMMARY

California's Master Plan for Education is ambitious in its scope and its full implementation will require a sustained commitment on the part of all Californians and substantial invest-

22. See A.B. 2217 (Ca. 2002).

ment from the state, local communities, and businesses. The Plan cannot proceed without the engagement of our entire state and all of its component parts. Parents, students, educators, researchers, policymakers, community-based organizations, and employers must regard as a responsibility the support of quality teaching and learning, and must both commit to and fulfill their respective responsibilities to implement this plan.

The drafters believe that virtually every student can and should be assisted in meeting (or even exceeding) high standards of achievement. Because learning takes place within the context of learners' lives, the needs to which California's education system must respond will inevitably change over time. Today's instruction is not limited to the use of slates and chalkboards, as it was in the past. With technology being increasingly important to learning, it is appropriate to conclude that instruction will not be limited to printed textbooks and face-to-face interaction between teachers and learners in the future. Our education system must use data as a means to engage in constant, purposeful innovation that monitors changes in what works in promoting student achievement with different types of learners and adjusts instructional strategies accordingly to better respond to student needs and to promote learning.

Those involved in the Master Plan have been assisted greatly by traditional researchers who seek to apply their findings to public policy, and a sampling of their work is highlighted in this Issue. States and education professionals would be well served to review their findings, become familiar with the challenges that face us all, and partner with them to meet those challenges.
