

**Testimony of Scott P. Plotkin
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On behalf of the California School Boards Association (CSBA), I appreciate the opportunity to address you today on the subject of educational governance.

The activities of CSBA are rooted in the Vision Statement for the Association:

The California School Boards Association envisions a state where the public schools are widely recognized as the foundation of a free and democratic society, where local citizen governing boards are fully vested with the means to advance the best interests of students and the public, and where the futures of all children are driven by their aspirations, not bounded by their circumstances.

To that end, CSBA strives to be a leader in providing comprehensive support for governance teams. Boards of education are entrusted by their diverse communities to ensure that a high quality education is provided to each student. CSBA provides training, support, resources and inspiration to governing boards and superintendents to maximize their effectiveness in carrying out their critical leadership functions.

Educational Reform in California

Schools are not and cannot be static institutions. Reform is healthy, and even essential, to make continuous improvement in student achievement as students, communities, and expectations change. This does not mean that the current system is failing, but rather indicates a necessity and a desire for continued growth. Ideally, education reform is proactive and driven by a vision for transforming education.

There is broad public consensus that the public K-12 educational system should adequately prepare students for university-level studies and/or the workforce. The key question then becomes what infrastructure is necessary to accomplish those goals, and others, that we as a state have set for the system. An analysis of the infrastructure is vital to ensure that the overall vision is feasible and that the goals can be realistically supported. Ultimately, we must determine the state's commitment to meet the infrastructure needs and, as necessary, to provide additional or innovative funding sources.

Unfortunately, the state in recent years has attempted to address infrastructure issues in a piecemeal fashion, sending at best mixed signals to governing boards. For example, in the past six years no less than 12 major K-12 education reforms have been enacted in California. Each of these major reforms has been comprehensive, in its own way. For instance, in 1999 the Legislature began a five-year effort to develop a Master Plan for California Public Education, preschool through university. Despite the best efforts of well-meaning state policymakers and literally thousands of hours contributed to the process by practitioners at all levels of public education, ultimately the result of this good work was just another well-written report that now sits on the bookshelves of those practitioners.

In the end, the result of these state-level efforts is a circumstance in which school districts must now meet the daunting challenge of making all these disparate reforms work together to improve student learning for all children in their communities. Indeed, school districts face a veritable alphabet soup of reforms – API, NCLB, AYP among them – which share goals but don’t necessarily work in tandem towards achieving those goals. The dysfunction of this disjointed accountability system is well illustrated by the fact that Cupertino Union School District – one of the most outstanding and highest-achieving districts in the state, with an overall API score of 918 – has been identified for Program Improvement, placing the district at risk of a state takeover.

Responsibility For Education At The State Level: Who’s In Charge Here?

Ultimately, we need to identify who is responsible for what within the system. Among others, the Legislative Analyst’s Office has clearly identified the need for delineating roles and responsibilities in California’s public K-12 system. The final report of the Joint Legislative Committee on the Master Plan for Education included strong recommendations on this point. Clear role definition allows for more efficient performance of responsibilities, with less duplication or gaps in effort. It also allows the system to hold individuals and institutions accountable.

Appropriate roles should be delineated at both the state and local levels. First and foremost, issues concerning statewide governance should be addressed. The state-level roles and responsibilities of the various entities involved in the development of education policy – Governor, Superintendent of Public Instruction, State Board of Education, Secretary of Education, Commission on Teacher Credentialing, etc. – are ill-defined, and that lack of definition results in confusion and conflict, making it difficult for districts and county offices of education to receive the support and information they need.

In defining local roles, it must be recognized that education is a local activity of fundamental interest to the entire state. Local responsibilities should be clearly identified and the authority of locally elected boards to provide support to school sites and to make decisions about the educational programs in their communities should be strengthened and supported by the state. Locally elected boards serve a fundamental role in the nation’s democratic system by facilitating and enabling local participation and engagement. California is in an ideal position to develop consensus on system goals and to help provide the necessary infrastructure to achieve these goals. However, local districts and sites can best anticipate local circumstances and therefore implement policies and programs with the highest degree of specificity.

Governance Standards At The Local Level

Mayoral control over school boards appears to have become the “reform d’jour” for public education in California: in recent comments made during an appearance at the University of California, Oakland mayor (and former California governor) Jerry Brown referred to school board members as invisible people without accountability, and suggested that mayors be given

greater control over the school boards within their jurisdictions; philanthropist Eli Broad recently circulated a proposed initiative to grant the mayors of Los Angeles, Fresno, Oakland, and San Francisco the authority to appoint the members of school boards within their cities; the Legislature has formed a Select Committee to study the issue of mayoral control of school boards; and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and the City of Los Angeles have announced the formation of a joint commission to examine LAUSD's current governance structure, and to make recommendations for changes to the structure that lead to better policy making, improved student performance, increased parental involvement and accountability.

Mayor Brown's comments implied that locally elected school board members do not operate under the same standards as do other elected officials, including mayors, city councils, county supervisors, and state legislators. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. CSBA has worked diligently in recent years to develop Professional Governance Standards for school board members that seek to generate a greater understanding about what constitutes effective governance by describing: 1) the responsibilities of individual trustees, 2) how boards can work together with the superintendent to achieve a unity of purpose, and 3) what the board's specific jobs are as they relate to vision, structure, accountability and community leadership. The intent of the standards is to support boards in their efforts to govern effectively and to enhance the public's understanding about the critical responsibilities of school boards. The standards provide a framework for boards to enhance their effectiveness, and are designed to focus a board's efforts and enhance understanding about what it takes to operate effectively as a team. For a board that has been experiencing challenges, reaching a common understanding about the key building blocks of effective governance is an essential first step.

Mayors are to be commended for their interest in ensuring that the schools in their jurisdictions perform at the highest level. At the same time, it is important to recognize that education does not occur in a vacuum, as though schools were isolated from the realities of families, neighborhoods and communities as a whole. Children spend more times in their homes and communities than they do in schools. In order for students to attain the desired educational outcomes, society must ultimately address the myriad needs of children and their families including such vital elements as health, nutrition, shelter and safety. To that end, CSBA co-founded and is an active partner in the Cities, Counties, Schools Partnership, with our colleagues at the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. It is only through working together, within the scope of each entities' responsibilities, that the problems facing today's children can be solved.

It may be outside the scope of the Commission's current work to study the broader issues of youth and families in the context of the communities that they live in, but we encourage the Commission to recognize the impact that social, economic and other influences have on student learning, and to call for a long-term, cohesive framework that coordinates and aligns all state and local programs impacting our youth.

Conclusion

As we entered into 2005, CSBA hoped that this would become the year that California policymakers would finally have the *right* conversation about public education in California – in short, what level of funding it takes for schools to achieve California standards, and what the best way is for the state to go about funding schools at that level. It has not turned out that way. The education community, including CSBA, has been drawn into an unwanted battle with the Schwarzenegger Administration over the level of funding to be provided schools in this, and future, fiscal years. It is a battle that, in the end, is one in which the losers could be California's students.

Locally elected board members are critical to the success of public schools in California, and recognize the need to continually improve and achieve improvements and efficiencies in the manner by which they conduct their responsibilities. However, unless and until California addresses the conundrum of having the nation's highest standards for success while funding schools at a per-pupil level that is 44th in the nation, all the governance reforms in the world will go for naught.



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