

# An Exclusive Interview With California K-12 Education

By Gregory J. Dannis

One hundred and fifty years ago this month, 48 delegates to the Constitutional Convention in Monterey signed the first California Constitution. It was handwritten on 10 sheets of parchment, 12 by 15 inches. Article IX, section 1, of the 1849 Constitution reads:

A general diffusion of knowledge and intelligence being essential to the preservation of the rights and liberties of the people, the Legislature shall encourage by all suitable means the promotion of intellectual, scientific, moral and agricultural improvement.

Section 3 states:

The Legislature shall provide for a system of common schools by which a free school shall be kept up and supported in each district at least six months in every year.

And so was born our system of K-12 public education.

This year, then, marks a milestone that we should not ignore. It's the big 1-5-0! On such a major birthday, one should pause to reflect on the past and ponder one's dreams and aspirations for the future. Many of you probably have heard about the new biography of Ronald Reagan in which the author uses the controversial device

of inserting himself into the story in order to present an intimate view of Mr. Reagan. In honor of K-12 education's 150th birthday, I sought and received similar artistic license from the literary powers that be; and I share with you my exclusive interview with California K-12 public education, who invited me to call her "Kay" after we spent so much time together.

We met in Kay's small villa in Imperial County, east of San Diego. Kay confided that she chose this residence because she felt safer living in the state's location geographically most distant from Sacramento.



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My first question was purposefully soft: "How do you feel after 150 years?"

She replied: "Well, not bad considering the attention I've been getting lately. I am being pulled in a thousand different directions based on as many different views of what my core purpose and role should be in shaping California's future. The cause of every social, economic, and spiritual ill in the state is tortuously being traced back to me, and that can make one feel depressed. The irony is, those who profess to know what I should become, often do not know who I already am."

This surprised me, so I had to ask: "After 150 years, do you really believe those who seek to change you do not know you?"

"That's exactly what I mean!" said Kay. "California is the seventh largest economy in the entire world with the largest K-12 public education system in the nation, made up of 1,000 school districts and over 8,000 schools. One of every seven students in the nation sits in a California classroom. Every year, there are 60,000 more students. By the year 2003, six million children will be in my classrooms."

"But, isn't it all relative?" I said. "Just because you are larger than any other K-12, don't other school systems have the same problems you do, but on a smaller scale?" Kay gave me a condescending look and finally deigned to answer: "It's not just numbers, it's real people. California is diverse like no other state and perhaps like no other country. One-and-a-half million of its students are native speakers of a language other than English. One million of its students come from families whose incomes are below the poverty line. Results of the latest Scholastic Aptitude Test reveal that 64 percent of its test takers learned English as a first language, while 82 percent did nationally. One in 10 of its students taking the SAT have parents without high-school diplomas, compared to 1 in 25 nationally. Fifty-seven percent of its test takers were non-white, compared to 33 percent nationally."

Kay paused; I decided it was time to get tough: "Are you suggesting that, due to our unique population, we should not assume that every child can learn?"

Kay gave me a threatening look and answered very quietly: "That question cuts to the essence of my constitutional purpose. And the answer is no. In fact, my SAT scores last year were above the national average in math and just slightly below in verbal skills. Your question assumes I cannot educate our children, leading some people

to believe that the only way to save our students is for them to abandon me for vouchers — and charter schools. Let's challenge that assumption.

"A 1999 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll concluded, based on three decades of polling, that 'the closer people are to the public schools, the better they like them.' Fifty-six percent of public school parents gave their schools grades of either excellent or good. Seventy-one percent said the focus in education should be on reforming the existing system, while 27 percent said an alternative system should be found."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Do you deny the growing popularity of the charter school movement in California? Last year the law removed the 100 cap on charter schools. This year, there are about 235 charters, with 74 more scheduled to open this fall. Charter school enrollment in 1997 was 37,000, but this year it exceeds 75,000. Even your own state Department of Education does not know exactly how many charters exist. You cannot deny their growing popularity, can you?"

Kay sighed, "No, I cannot. But here, again, let's challenge underlying assumptions. I have heard it said that 'charters offer a flexibility that we wouldn't have otherwise.' Even the President of the United States plans to spend \$95 million on charter schools over the next three years (\$12.6 million in California). Why? President Clinton replies, 'With this step, we'll raise standards, raise expectations, and raise accountability by having public schools that are free to create, to innovate, and be held accountable.'

"I'm trying hard not to take this personally, but what exactly is it that these people, including the President, feel they need to be 'free' of so that schools can create, exceed expectations, and be accountable? What is preventing us from creating freedom within the public school system, rather than apart from it? If the 'bureaucracy' and the Education Code are holding schools back, why not change the law to allow schools and districts to be exempt from the code, like charter schools, yet remain within the district under its board and administration?"

"And if charters are truly supposed to be free of constraints on educational innovation, why is there a new law requiring collective bargaining laws to apply to charter schools? Isn't this one of the 'stifling bureaucracies?' My point is that reform need not be at an extreme end of the spectrum to effect change. Our teachers, our administrators, our school board members, and especially our students deserve a fair chance to prove they can meet rising expectations and be held accountable while not being discarded completely."

“Okay, stop right there,” I said. “You just ran quickly through your major constituents. But let’s take them one at a time. What is the state of our teaching force in your opinion?”

Kay responded immediately: “We need more teachers! Nationally, 2.2 million teachers will be needed over the next 10 years; we will need 260,000 of them in California. This year alone we need over 22,000 new teachers. One-half of all new teachers are leaving the profession within their first five years. Currently, 30,000 of the teachers are serving with emergency credentials.

“According to a recent study by the Stanford Research Institute, in the average school where fewer than 25 percent of the students receive free lunches, only 4 percent of the teachers lack appropriate credentials. In schools where 75 percent of the children receive free lunches – the schools of the poor – 16 percent lack the right credentials. In schools with more than a 90 percent minority population, the number goes up to 19 percent.

“I fear we are becoming a state of gaps – gaps in income between rich and poor, between our private affluence and our neglected public services, and, most significantly, the quality gap between the public schools serving the affluent and those serving the poor.

“We need to attract more qualified people to the teaching profession, change the system to make it financially rewarding, and resurrect the elements that made teaching emotionally satisfying enough to stay there. This requires reexamining our credentialing system, our seniority system, and our teacher salaries.

“We need to reach out more and make the process of putting good people into the classrooms less onerous. The interest is there; we just need to tap it.”

“Alright,” I said. “So the need and the interest are out there for teachers, but what about administrators?”

Kay responded: “We need hundreds of new principals in the next 10 years. More than 80 percent of the 7,800 school principals are over 45 and approaching retirement at age 55, according to the state Department of Education.

“I know that good education does not occur without good teachers, but always give credit to the principals. They make schools work. The task of leading a public school never has been harder. A recent article summed it up nicely:

While trying to reform curricula and attitudes, they must feed and clothe kids, tie floppy shoelaces, and hound students to sit up straight and arrive on time. They must also work well with parents, teachers, and district officials, respond to the public’s demand for improved test scores and adapt to California’s dizzying flow of education reforms.

I interrupted Kay at this point. “I understand the need to attract and retain teachers and principals,” I said, “but what about the public’s demand for safe schools in light of the violence at Columbine, for accountability, for improving low-performing schools, for an end to social promotion, and for higher test scores? Shouldn’t these areas be your highest priorities?”

Kay held up both hands in front of her and said, “Slow down, slow down! You’re reeling those off almost as fast as the legislature expects us to accomplish them. No one can disagree with these goals. That’s why they are so appealing for politicians to talk about. We have education presidents, education presidential aspirants, education governors, and education ‘every men’ everywhere. Because the issues are framed simplistically for public consumption, the supposed solutions are rarely substantial enough to make a real difference.

“Let’s take the issues you mentioned. First, violence in the schools. This year we have funding for about one additional counselor at each high school. But our school system ranks last in the nation in the number of counselors per student. The recommended ratio is 1 counselor to every 100 to 300 students. The national average is 1 to 512 students. In California, the average is 1 to every 1,056 students. If people want to prevent violence in my schools, we need to decrease the counselor-to-student ratio by a meaningful amount.

“Next, accountability. Under Senate Bill 1X, 430 low-performing schools were picked randomly for a new program that pays money to these schools to improve, but threatens them with closure should they fail. However, the state Department of Education has identified over 3,000 low-performing schools. Should we wait six or seven years to help these schools?

“Next is an end to social promotion. Two bills this year allocate a total of \$105 million to create new promotion and retention policies and provide summer school programs for students in need. However, there are three million low-performing students in our schools and it would take \$600 million to provide one month of assistance to all these children.

“Next is raising standardized test scores. Recently, I heard a teacher describe his newest teaching strategy as ‘drill and kill.’ He and his colleagues are so concerned about how their schools and districts will be judged that they are devoting all their energies to making sure students score well on these tests.

“At the same time, the headline in the September 1999 issue of *Education Week* reads: ‘Standards at a Crossroads After Decade: High Stakes Testing Is Chief Worry.’ The 10 year old standards-driven agenda for schools is being put to the test, with parents, civil rights activists, and educators questioning standardization of the curriculum and reliance on test scores for decisions such as student promotion and high school graduation.

“In Massachusetts, Ohio, and Texas, we see student boycotts, political lobbying, and lawsuits. In Wisconsin, the legislature refused to budget any money to write the high school graduation test proposed by the governor. The universal complaint is that the test totally drives the curriculum, ultimately to the detriment of that curriculum.”

“But wait,” I said, “Are you saying there should be no standards, no measurements, and no accountability? How will we assess whether our schools work, whether teachers teach, and whether students learn? How can we judge them without some objective measure of their success or failure?”

Kay was silent for so long I was not sure she would answer. Finally, she began to speak softly: “You’re right, of course, and I don’t have a pat response. I know our students must learn to read and do math. I know we can’t just send them away after the 12th grade if they haven’t. But I fear losing other important parts of the system — most of all, teaching children how to think. I fear creating a double standard that demands great teachers but confines them to teaching test-preparation skills instead of nurturing that indefinable talent which makes them great. So, my answer is, do not go too far, too fast down the standards-based road, especially with too little evidence of its impact. Many who have tried it for 10 years now are having second thoughts.”

“Well,” I said to Kay, “it seems you have opinions on everything the lawmakers have done in the past few years. What would you do if you made the laws yourself?”

A smile crept slowly across Kay’s face until she was positively beaming from ear to ear, her eyes twinkling mischievously.

“I’m so glad you finally asked,” she said. “After waiting 150 years for the chance, I think I would have a little fun first by giving the powers that be a little taste of their own medicine.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Well, I’d start with my own ‘X bills.’ The first would be Kay 1X, entitled ‘California Legislature Education Accountability Reform’ or ‘CLEAR.’ CLEAR would establish the ‘LPI – the legislator performance index,’ which would hold legislators accountable for any education-related legislation introduced in any session. The highest LPI score achievable would go to the legislator who introduces no education-related bills. For each education bill introduced, the LPI would go down by 5 percent. If an LPI goes below 70 percent, the legislator could be ‘shut down’ – that is, prohibited from introducing any education legislation the following year. This is the same as the penalty for school principals who do not improve their Academic Performance Index – the API – by at least 5 percent each year, even though this is a statistical impossibility. And remember – in the 1997-98 legislative session, 650 bills were introduced affecting public education; 180 of them became law. That pace has not slowed in 1998-99 or 1999-2000. I can’t even begin to understand how we are supposed to comply with last year’s new laws while hundreds more are coming along this year. We need a rest!”

“Okay, what else would you propose?”

“Next, Kay 2X would establish the ‘legislative peer assistance and review program,’ or ‘LPAR.’ Any legislator whose LPI is below 70 percent would be referred to peer assistance by a consulting legislator – the CL – who has been chosen by a panel, the majority of which must be made up of school board members, administrators, teachers, and classified employees. After one year of assistance, the CL will issue a recommendation to the panel regarding the legislator’s ability to propose education-related legislation. The panel must then report to the governor and the public one of two findings: (1) that the legislator now appreciates the difference between helping schools to improve and placing even more obstacles in the way of such improvement, or (2) that despite receiving sustained assistance, the legislator is not able to demonstrate a satisfactory understanding of the complex issues facing public schools and is therefore likely to continue proposing ill-conceived school reform legislation.

“In the latter case, the legislator would be prohibited from introducing any school-related bills until the panel found him or her competent to do so.

“Oh, and by the way, participation in LPAR would not be mandatory. But, if the legislature does not implement the program by 2000-2001, I would cut off funding for all of their salaries.”

“That’s pretty severe” I said. “Do you have any other ideas?”

“Well, I have one other major frustration,” said Kay. “We can talk all we want about what needs to happen inside my classrooms, but I am equally concerned about the sorry state of the rooms themselves. Last year, voters passed a \$9.2 billion bond measure, but meeting the real need for modernized or new schools will cost \$40 billion. Class-size reduction is great, but it did not build additional schools. It took over labs and libraries and eliminated playgrounds by adding portables. In other states, it is considered scandalous for portables to provide even 10 percent of total classrooms, but one-third of my classrooms are portables.

“My idea won’t cost the state any money. I propose that so long as the law requires a 2/3 vote to pass local bonds, the same percentage should be required to elect a governor, state senator, or assemblyman. If a candidate receives more than 50 percent, but less than 66 percent, of the vote, they still will have to take office and perform the duties required, but without any pay. It only seems fair – if our schools still have to meet their constitutional mandate without the money, even if they receive a majority vote, elected officials should too. If and when the bond passage requirement goes down to 50 percent, the one for elective office will too.”

“Well, we’re coming to the end of our time together.” I said “Do you have any wise words for the public regarding your future.”

Kay took a deep breath and responded:

“My words are simple, but the challenges they represent are not. First, we must dispel the falsehoods about who I really am, instead of relying for comfort on a false clarity of my purpose and my role.

“Second, I cannot continue to meet my constitutional purpose if what I am depends on the uncoordinated and disjointed efforts at reforming me. I need a master plan like the one proposed in Senate Concurrent Resolution 2 and supported by ACSA, CSBA, CFT, and the California PTA. We need a blueprint to guide future generations and force them to think and plan before they legislate.

“Third, valid reform efforts must be the product of collaboration from the ground up, and not handed down from above. School districts receive their harshest criticism when the decision-making process is not inclusive. The same must be true of education reform. Before they make laws affecting public schools, lawmakers must consult local board members, teachers, classified employees, employee unions, and parents.

“Fourth, and most significantly, either the current system of school financing must be abandoned or unrestricted revenue limit funding must be substantially increased to provide a level playing field to all of my schools. In the last decade, categorical funding has increased 55 percent while general purpose funding has decreased by 2 percent.

“I have heard for years that problems with public education will not be solved by throwing more money at them. Well, it’s time not only to throw more money but to stop dictating where all that money lands.”

“That’s very forthright advice,” I said. “In closing, can you point to any legislation this year that symbolizes your hope for the future of our schools?”

“Yes,” said Kay, “and let me say clearly that I am hopeful, despite all my complaining. My favorite new law that reflects this hope is Assembly Bill 1014, which establishes “Instructional School Gardens” in our school districts. The concept of a garden of learning reminded me of Voltaire’s most famous book, *Candide*.

“*Candide* is the story of an innocent man’s experiences in a mad and evil world, his struggle to survive in that world, and his need ultimately to come to terms with it. Life is full of struggles, Voltaire teaches, but people must not passively accept whatever fate seems to have in store for them, shrugging off their personal responsibility.

“After traveling the world, *Candide* realizes that everything in life is not evil, but that one must work to attain satisfaction.

“*Candide*’s famous ending line is: ‘We must cultivate our own garden.’ My closing message to those who would know me and seek to change me is: Don’t rationalize, but be part of a society where there is collective effort. Don’t utopianize, but improve. We must cultivate our own garden of K-12 public education because no one can do it for us. And we have more than enough talent, drive, and commitment to tend to our own garden.”