

Turning the Tables: When Schools Enact Legislation

BY GREGORY J. DANNIS

Nearly 150 years ago, 48 delegates to a state constitutional convention in Monterey, Calif., signed the original California Constitution and created me—California's system of K-12 public education (please call me "Kay"). After waiting this long for the chance, I'd like to turn the tables on those who constantly seek to reform me and instead propose my own legislation.

My first bill would be Kay IX, titled "California Legislature Education Accountability Reform" or CLEAR. CLEAR would establish a Legislator Performance Index to hold elected officials accountable for the impact of any education-related legislation.

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 would be shut down—that is, prohibited from introducing any education legislation the following year. Why? I need a breather!

In the last two years, almost 1,500 bills were introduced to the California legislature affecting public education; almost one-third of them became law. I can't even understand how to reform myself based on one year's worth of new laws while hundreds more come along the next year. I need a rest!

Next bill I'd adopt would be Kay 2X, establishing the Legislative Peer Assistance and Review Program. This would be tied directly to the Legislator Performance Index. Under this law, any legislator whose LPI falls below 70 percent would be referred to peer assistance by a consulting legislator, chosen for this remedial role by a panel of school board members, administrators and other school employees.

After a year of assistance, the consulting legislator will issue a recommendation to the panel regarding the legislator's ability to propose education-related legislation. The panel then must report to the governor and the public that, first, the legislator now appreciates the difference between helping schools to improve and placing even more obstacles in the way of such improvement or, second, despite sustained assistance, the legislator is unable to grasp the complex issues facing public schools and is likely to con-

tinue proposing ill-conceived school reform legislation. In the latter case, the legislator would be prohibited from introducing further school-related bills.

Scandalous Conditions

I have another major frustration. 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. Most of my schools are more than 30 years old. Their internal systems are as antiquated as the exteriors, often precluding telephonic and other kinds of outlets necessary to tap into support technology.

In addition, class-size reduction efforts did not result in the building of additional schools. Rather, labs and libraries became classrooms and playgrounds were eliminated for portables. In other states, it is considered scandalous for portables to approach 10 percent of total classrooms, but one-third of my state's classrooms are portables.

I propose that so long as the law requires a two-thirds vote to pass local bonds, the same percentage should be required to elect a governor or legislator. If a candidate receives more than 50 percent, but less than 66 percent of the vote, they will assume office and perform the duties required, but without any pay. It only seems fair. If my schools still have to meet their constitutional mandate without the money even if they receive a majority vote, elected officials should too.

Plan, Then Act

Let me lay out my needs clearly. 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 upon the uncoordinated and disjointed efforts at reforming me. I need a master plan—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, not handed down from those on high. All of my school districts are told to collaborate with staff, the public and even students before they make policy changes, and they 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 me, lawmakers must consult local board members, teachers, classified employees, employee unions and parents.

Fourth, the current system of school financing must either be abandoned or unrestricted funding must be substantially increased to provide a level playing field to all of my schools. In the last decade, funding limited to special purposes has increased 55 percent while general purpose funding has decreased by 2 percent. I have heard for years that my problems will not be solved by throwing more money at me. Well, it's time not only to throw more money at me but to stop dictating exactly where all that money lands.

Cultivating a Garden

I can think of only one piece of legislation this year that symbolizes my hope for the future of my schools. This particular bill established "instructional school gardens" in my 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. Thus, I quote *Candide*'s famous ending line, "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.

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