

Four Priorities for Oregon Schools

Thank you for the kind introduction. I value this time we have together. All of us here are called upon in our specific roles, to provide leadership to make Oregon's schools even better places for students to learn. We have just finished a school year like no other in recent history: our state is suffering from deep economic distress, and the federal government's new role in education has placed added pressures on our education system. We've had to balance budgets, then rebalance, then rebalance again, because of continuing revenue shortfalls. We've had unprecedented program, staff, and school-day cuts. And we've had to face it all in the morning comics, in "Doonesbury."

As we face another school year of fiscal uncertainty we must continue to summon the energy and inspiration to support our highest priority, Oregon's children.

Before I go any further I want to say that I cannot emphasize enough my deep respect and appreciation for your dedication and the work that you and your colleagues do to open doors to the future for each of your students.

The good news is that we are making excellent progress and our students are experiencing success despite all of the challenges. But there is still much to be done to reach our vision for education in Oregon. Today I would like to talk to you about two key issues that will help us address the needs of our students. Right now in Oregon, we have a funding gap; and we have an achievement gap.

In order to close these two gaps we need to believe that regardless of external forces, we are in control of much of our own destiny. We must engage Oregonians as never before to boost school funding, and we must work differently to help kids achieve at higher levels.

I know how tough those external forces are to deal with. I know that you must feel that everybody's out to get you. The Governor ran for office saying he was going to cut \$80 million in school administration. The State Legislature won't provide decent funding. The Federal government has imposed an under funded mandate. Talk-show hosts babble about waste, fraud and abuse. I know that many of you lost talented colleagues to retirement because of the unpredictable situation with PERS. And probably some of you, in the face of all of the challenges, are wishing you could retire with them. But I'm glad you are here.

Your students, your schools, and your communities need dedicated leaders like you in times like these.

You are experts on what happens in the classroom. As an elected official and a former reporter, I have expertise on what happens in the legislative hearing room and the newsroom. So today, I'm going to start by talking about politics, and about communication. I'm going to talk about the funding gap, the gap between what we really need and what we have, and discuss the political context. And I'm going to talk about the student achievement gap. I'm going to give you my best thoughts about how we can work together on these two critical issues in the legislative hearing room, in the news room and, most importantly, in the classroom.

First, let's talk about the funding gap. In order to have schools funded at the September 2001 level the State would have to give us \$5.5 billion for the next two years. In order to fully implement the Quality Education Model, and have schools able to have 90% of students meet our standards, we would've needed \$6.5 billion.

So, two weeks ago the State House of Representatives voted for a \$4.9 billion allocation. Now, is that sufficient? NO, It's a disgrace and I said so repeatedly throughout the legislative session. I told legislators that if they weren't going to provide sufficient funding, then they should stand up and acknowledge that they aren't really committed to ensuring that every child will meet our standards; that they are prepared to leave lots of children behind; that they're not really interested in closing the achievement gap. I told them that \$4.9 billion isn't a number, it's a policy choice, and it's a really bad policy choice.

I know that we're all hoping that we'll end up with even \$5.3 billion. And I have made it clear, just as you have, that \$5.3 billion isn't going to get us back to where we were two years ago.

As we wait for others to act, can we expect the Oregon Legislature, or the federal government, to increase funding dramatically in the near future? Probably not. Those legislators voted for that really bad policy choice because most of them believed that a majority of their constituents would not support raising taxes to fund schools at a higher level. They looked at the state-wide returns on Measure 28, and they concluded "that is what my constituents want."

Those same legislators need to realize that an improved economy won't fix a revenue system that is suffering from a "structural deficit". The practical effect of that deficit is that without a new law or an initiative approved by the voters, or a reduction in other parts of state government, schools cannot expect an increase in funding.

So how do we react to this funding level? By doing the best job we can with what we have. Do we pretend that 90% of kids are going to meet standards, with \$4.9 billion or even \$5.3 billion? No. But we can deploy our limited resources as effectively as possible. The Quality Education Model provides a framework for meeting standards and we must build upon that framework to provide quality education with the money we get.

We also need to recognize that we do have a credibility problem. It's mostly about things we don't control; indeed, it's mostly just a reflection of the 35-year decline in credibility of government at all levels. We didn't authorize hush money for the Watergate burglars. We didn't promise that victory would be swift in Vietnam. But when someone claims we would save \$500 million if we eliminated the 21st Century School Act, too many people believed it. When we tell legislators we need \$6.5 billion to meet the goals of the Quality Education Model, they don't believe us. Many continue to believe that the money would be spent on bloated administration and that it would make no difference in classrooms.

I also want to make the point that we are held to a higher standard and I have a perfect example of that.

They hold us to a different standard. It's not fair, but it's reality.

For the long-term success of our children we must strengthen our efforts to educate our public, and our legislature, about our students, their schools and their needs. I think we had a good example of successfully communicating a message in this current legislative session. Randy Miller, co-chair of the Ways and Means Committee, came into the session announcing that he was going to abolish "worthless" state tests because they cost \$500 million a year. We worked with COSA and other community

partners to erase misperceptions about these test. The result; a new law to 'mend, not end' Oregon's system passed overwhelmingly.

I know that your professional responsibilities have increased greatly in this budget crisis. But... we need to make a renewed effort in our communities. We need to spend more time with the local newspaper editor ... make an occasional call to a TV station ... visit the Chamber of Commerce ... visit the Rotary Club. We can put more effort into activities like Back to School Week, that get members of the community into the schools so they can see firsthand the incredible work that goes on there. And you can visit your legislators, during the session, and, more importantly, between sessions; take them through your budget; and invite them to visit your school where they can talk with students about how budget decisions directly affect what happens in the classroom.

I think that to a certain extent, we've mishandled the situation by spending a huge percentage of our time complaining about funding and not enough time talking about our successes at making the system better and more accountable. People are more willing to invest in something that is already good and getting better than in something they think is falling apart.

I'm prepared to do everything I can to help you improve the political environment. Whenever I hear any politician or pundit, talk about all the money wasted on school leadership, you can count on me to talk about the real figures. Whenever I hear anyone talk about how we spend more and more money on schools and get less back in achievement, you can count on me to say that's not true, and I'll have the facts and figures to prove it.

I don't think it's a hopeless cause. After all, Measure 28 was supposed to lose 70%-30%, and it only lost 54%-46%. A few months ago, local options passed in urban and rural areas around the State. This means that there is a lot of support for public education in the state and we just need to keep working hard to change the outcomes in our favor.

I also think it is important to remind our public and political representatives that, in spite of the budget crisis, student achievement is up. Achievement is up. Kids are learning. But we can't expect to meet the very high expectations that everyone has for us; that ALL children will meet our high standards, with the current level of funding. This brings me to the other important challenge we are facing today: the student achievement gap.

We have an achievement gap in Oregon. When you break down the assessment data it shows that not all of our students are achieving to the high level we know they can. We have a moral obligation to change that. We must identify and implement strategies that move all students to high levels of achievement. We cannot have two education systems--one of high expectations for the children of the fortunate and one of lesser standards for the children of the less fortunate in our society. None of us thinks this is acceptable. All students need the skills and tools to compute, critique, and create at high levels to be successful in our society.

I know first hand what the achievement gap means to an individual student and to that student's family. My mother dropped out of school in the eighth grade as she struggled to learn English and could not keep up. I saw what that meant for my mother. Her opportunities were limited to spending years doing manual labor in a furniture

factory. As I was growing up, I heard my mother express regret about not completing her education and I learned about the connection between education and opportunity. None of us want to see the doors of opportunity closed to anyone.

Let's take a minute to talk about No Child Left Behind within this framework. I know that people feel that it is, at best, an under-funded mandate, but the fact is, one of the major premises of 'No Child Left Behind' – the need to close the achievement gap – is our premise, too. We must work together to implement this legislation, within the context of Oregon priorities. Let me be clear about this: NCLB doesn't define the high water mark for education in Oregon. We must own our successes and our challenges. We must be responsible and accountable. And let me be equally clear that achieving those goals is not the exclusive responsibility of the people in this room, Congress and the Oregon legislature need to start getting acquainted with the concept of paying the full cost of dramatic policy pronouncements.

Building on the work already done in Oregon by you and our other partners, we have established four priorities to help focus and guide our work: 1) to close the achievement gap, 2) to take a comprehensive approach to literacy, 3) to focus on middle and high school improvement, and 4) to improve the efficiency of the Oregon Department of Education. We believe that in order for Oregon schools to deliver on the high expectations that we have established, progress on these four areas is critical.

Our first priority, to have each student meet Oregon standards in reading, writing, mathematics and science is not debatable. Although overall achievement is up in the state, it must be accelerated beyond current levels in order to meet the goal for all students. To do this, we must better understand our data, and use effective strategies for improvement. Together, we must make the fundamental shift from universal access to universal proficiency in education. The department is committed to helping you identify and promote successful practices. Together we will identify specific growth targets for student achievement and hold districts accountable for meeting them. Together we will work toward new Language Acquisition goals for our limited English Proficient students. And we will strive to recruit and train a culturally competent and ethnically diverse workforce both within the agency and in the schools.

There are two other initiatives that we are supporting as we address the achievement gap. I am advocating for full-day kindergarten, and I am working with our post secondary partners to better prepare teachers and school leaders with the skills necessary to be successful in Oregon classrooms.

The department's second priority is to take a comprehensive approach to literacy. The research is very clear. The ability to read, write and speak well is the gateway for all learning. We know students who read and write well will experience success in the future. And our data indicates we are doing very well at the elementary level. As I've visited schools throughout the state I've seen many innovative elementary curriculum projects. Ashland Superintendent Julie DiChiro took me to Walker Elementary School where I saw students connecting the art and culture of Africa with core academic skills. At Eugene Field Elementary School in the Silver Falls School District I saw new programs developing for English Language Learners and Talented and Gifted students. These programs, and many others, result in more students meeting and exceeding standards.

In order to close the achievement gap and improve literacy across the board, we need to focus on a third priority; middle and high school improvement. We are maintaining high average SAT scores and reducing the drop out rate throughout the state, but middle and high school students are still not achieving to their full potential. In order to reach these students, we need to work differently; we are implementing strategies such as awarding credit for proficiency, E-Learning and Distance Education. With the aid of \$25 million from the Gates Foundation and the Meyer Trust, Oregon educators are already creating smaller; more personal and engaging learning opportunities to help accelerate achievement. Yet we need to do more than just create smaller learning communities. We need to incorporate the new three R's—relationships, relevancy, and rigor--to personalize student's educational experiences through curriculum mapping and alignment to standards in order to raise student achievement. The time has come to consolidate our work, across the state and in individual schools, into a more targeted state-wide strategy.

Our fourth priority is to make the Oregon Department of Education more efficient—essentially, make it work better. We must become even more relevant to the work that you are faced with on a daily basis, more relevant to policy makers in Salem as they ask for accountability and data, and more relevant to the strategy of holding those same policy makers accountable for their policy and funding decisions. The Department has had its own share of budget cuts and, just like you, we must discipline and focus our efforts. We are committed to delivering high quality data for accountability and policy-making purposes for the legislature and the public. We are committed to delivering high quality resources and professional development opportunities to schools and districts.

We are in an era of accountability. Measure 5 has shifted financial authority to the legislature. We have the Oregon School and District Report Card, state assessments and now the federal mandate of NCLB. During our budget hearings the word 'accountability' was repeated over and over. This is our reality. The good news is that the 'science' of accountability and decision-making has made us more aware. We know more about who is succeeding and who is not, who is dropping out and who is not, who is likely to veer off track and who is capable of learning more quickly than we might expect. However, accountability assumes the ability to take action and make changes. It is time to revisit all our actions in this enterprise of public education.

Local elected school boards have an important role in knowing and understanding how the students in their care are actually doing...all of them ...not just the rolled up data for the entire district but student by student, right down to each and every classroom. I will call on school boards to turn up the volume on their expectation for school improvement and on their expectation for support from the community . . . the entire community.

Business leaders are eager to assist with this cause. Their companies depend on highly skilled workers who can easily adapt to our quickly changing world. I know there are already successful business partnerships in place in your districts, like those I've seen at Reynolds High School, in Canby, in Eugene 4J, and at Grants Pass High School. We need to nurture more of these partnerships.

As with business, Education service districts, universities, and community colleges must become our active partners. We must ALL be proactive as we address the issues of student achievement.

The Oregon Department of Education must be both enforcer and facilitator. We must expect schools and districts to be accountable and responsible for the same standards and the same outcomes, not by working against one another but rather by working together.

The many CIM and CAM-related bills that came before this legislative session made us take a careful look at what is important to us in continuing education reform. We had to ask, "have CIM and CAM outlived their usefulness?" What is creating more success for more kids and what is not? "What is our vision for the next 25 years?"

It is tempting to talk among ourselves about how well we do our jobs, how good test scores are and how uninformed our critics are, but it's more important that we talk with the people in our communities about these things. Because it will be our neighbors, citizens, in your community and mine, that ultimately hold the Legislature accountable if we do our job well.

It is no longer acceptable that some students learn to their full potential and others don't. The battle for changing this situation must be fought on two fronts: in our classrooms and in our communities. We know that, in spite of limited budget resources, we can achieve much toward our goals with focused, strategic efforts. Humboldt Elementary is a school in Portland that struggles with the challenges of poverty. But principal Judy Bryant and her staff looked beyond their struggles to see the bigger picture. She saw that to improve the school and encourage student success she had to call her community to action. Students and school staff, with the help of parents and community members, took on the challenges and created a school dedicated to success. And the improvements made by this school are reflected not only in improved community relationships, but also in improved test scores!

I want to share with you the words of Dr. Benjamin Mays, President Emeritus of Morehouse College:

"It must be borne in mind that the tragedy in life does not lie in failing to reach your goal; the tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It is not a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream. It is not a disaster to fail to capture your ideal, but it is a disaster to have no ideal to capture. It is not a disgrace to fail to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no star to reach for. Not failure, but low aim is sin."

I agree with Dr. Mays. We cannot allow the current situation to stop us from having goals, dreams, and aspirations. Oregon students depend on us to set high goals, to advocate for adequate funding, and to rise to the achievement challenges. Their success will be our legacy.