

**Hearing on Educational Governance and Accountability  
Testimony to the Little Hoover Commission  
January 24, 2008**

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I want to thank the Commission for inviting the Department of Education to participate in this hearing on educational governance and accountability. You have asked for information on our capacity to implement state and federal accountability measures.

At your October 25, 2007, hearing, the Commission heard in great detail about the history and current state of the Department's intervention and accountability work.

My testimony today will address the state's and the Department's capacity to operate the accountability systems we have in place, the challenges we face, and some of the way forward for California, particularly with regard to State Superintendent Jack O'Connell's priority efforts to close the achievement gap.

Significantly, at the outset, it is crucial to note that all of our efforts to date and into the future are at grave risk of being undone if the Governor's proposed education cuts prevail. His January 10 budget calls for suspending the Proposition 98 guarantee with across-the-board funding reductions to local educational agencies as well as the Department. The impact such cuts could have on local, regional and state efforts to improve student achievement and reduce the achievement gaps quite simply would set our efforts back by years.

In a national context, this is especially disheartening. *Education Week* recently released its national report card on school funding, making it poignantly clear that California spends nearly \$1,900 per pupil below the national average. The amount we invest in students is \$5,100 per pupil less than New Jersey, \$4,000 less than Wyoming and \$1,500 less than Louisiana. I hope Commissioners will agree that is simply unacceptable, especially when we consider that California has *the* most diverse and challenging student population.

State Structure and Capacity

The state has had an interest in local education for many decades, increasingly so since Proposition 13. For today's purpose, I speak from the perspective of the standards-based education system that began roughly ten years ago. With the advent of the state Public Schools Accountability Act in 1999, and with the enactment (and subsequent implementation) of the federal No Child Left Behind

Act of 2001, the Department's accountability work largely centered on school level improvement efforts, and we have been largely successful in those efforts.

As a reminder, you heard in October that of the first cohort of 430 schools in the state's program for improvement, only six reached the end of the road without acceptable levels of growth on state tests.

The capacity to do the hard work of raising student academic achievement resides at all levels. Philosophically, the department's approach has been to create the conditions, the structure, and the wherewithal for district capacity to be built that insures sustained, consistent improvement. Much of our work is dedicated to that effort, and as such, is not direct state action.

State capacity in this effort has been largely developed, at our behest and with our direction, in the field. That capacity takes the form of teams sent to each of the schools in need of improvement. These School Assistance and Intervention Teams (SAITs) are public and private providers with expertise around best practice for school improvement, working off state guidelines developed around the activities that we know work.

Also significant in this effort, state capacity can be found in the form of county superintendents taking an active role in the schools and districts they are charged with "superintending" on the state's behalf.

As you also learned in October, this has been an evolutionary process, informed by successes and failures. It has also been affected, to a great degree, by the sometimes conflicting metrics mandated by federal accountability and state accountability. California made a conscious decision, when faced with implementing NCLB, to not abandon its own established, credible system of accountability measurement based on year-to-year growth. So while the activities that underpin school intervention efforts are quite similar, the triggers for those interventions are confounding to many and can create confusion in the field.

I want to note that one significant benefit to this evolution of interventions has been that we have gained a much better understanding of the critical role district structures play in improving achievement. As such, our current construct for district intervention is based upon those lessons learned. With the county superintendents, we are operating a pilot project aimed at direct district improvement. In addition, we are intending to pursue legislation, in concert with the Governor, and working closely with the Legislature, to expand and refine that process, again through what we learned in the field.

In all of this work, the California model of school and district intervention is diverse and dispersed. In California, for as long as I can remember, there has been a regional context and approach for school and district improvement. As such, it is difficult to give you specific data about state capacity -- we have built a

system that utilizes the best of state and local expertise, mostly resident in our counties and their eleven service regions, to conduct the business of school and district academic reform.

Whether the capacity for improvement is state, county, or district, this work has severely taxed the capacity of the system to adapt and intervene appropriately. I believe I speak for the entire education community when I say we are operating at the very limits of our collective capacities, subjected to massive yearly swings in resources and focus as we brave the cycle of boom and bust in our budgeting process.

### Comments on testimony and findings of Center for Education Policy

This provides a great segue to our comments on your earlier testimony from the Center for Education Policy. In general, we agree with the CEP findings. We particularly agree that state departments need additional resources to assist schools and districts.

For the last several years the Department has put forward Budget Change Proposals to authorize the use of federal funds to increase staff devoted to intervention and accountability work. Unfortunately, these proposals have not been successful.

As a testament to the validity of California's approach, I would point to the CEP finding that "some districts have voluntarily used site visitors from the state's accountability support systems to help monitor and improve schools." In terms of California's accountability work, this means that districts with Program Improvement (PI) schools use the School Assistance and Intervention Team (SAIT) process and approved SAIT Providers to help PI schools; thus, it is one more step in integrating intervention across state and federal accountability objectives.

### The Achievement Gap

From Superintendent O'Connell's perspective, no conversation about either the structure or conventions of school improvement can be complete without a discussion of how to close the pernicious achievement gaps that exist between African Americans and Hispanics and Whites, between the economically disadvantaged and those with means, between general and special education students, and between English Learners and native English speakers. Under the State Superintendent's leadership, the Department of Education has redoubled its efforts to close these gaps.

Here are the structural changes we made: In 2007, the Department created the Policy Development and External Affairs Branch to work with the field and other Department branches to identify best practices and develop strategies to better

share solutions with practitioners. This Branch works with the Superintendent's Statewide P-16 Council, an advisory council of about fifty representatives from pre-kindergarten, K-12, higher education, parent, business and community groups.

Also in 2007, the Superintendent created a new Language Learner and Support Division where he centralized several previously disparate units that deal with the panoply of issues around instruction and support to English Learners.

Most recently, the Department has reorganized its division charged with school and district improvement to better assist in building capacity of districts to improve student achievement. It consolidated a broad spectrum of NCLB-related activities into a single division, including Title I policy, monitoring, and corrective actions, which will facilitate greater coordination and consistency in our work with districts. It will also enhance our capacity to appropriately integrate federal and state interventions.

### Changing the role of CDE

The Commission has asked about the Department's view on changing its role away from a focus on compliance monitoring to one that focuses on providing direct assistance.

This presumes that the Superintendent has not already focused on those activities. From the beginning of his administration, Superintendent O'Connell has placed emphasis on just that: assistance over compliance. The department has successfully streamlined and modified its main compliance monitoring effort to place more focus on ongoing improvement in districts, rather than strict adherence to code. It should be noted, of course, that many of the state and federal codes we are charged with enforcing are quite rigid themselves. As such, the Superintendent sees his role as necessarily both toward compliance and promotion or assistance, and in our current governance system, that will never change.

There are three specific initiatives I want to mention in how the Superintendent seeks to improve the educational delivery system going forward, all of which were announced last Tuesday.

First, in order to build an information system that provides all the information we need to make the best possible decisions we can to serve each individual student in California, we are embarking on an effort to envision and then create an expanded state education information system. Because of limits placed on what data we currently collect, we are not able to do many things today. As a big step toward instilling an educational culture based on information, the Superintendent announced a generous grant of over \$2 million from the Gates and Hewlett foundations to create a vision and roadmap for what kind of data our

state needs to truly improve teaching and learning as well as decision making at both the state and local level. We will partner with the highly regarded McKinsey and Company to help guide this project and will include all stakeholders in this envisioning process.

Second, accepting the fact that collecting this valuable information is only half the equation, Superintendent O'Connell has unveiled the beginnings of a bridge to connect schools and districts. A program called Brokers of Expertise will provide a new level of connection and cohesion across levels and regions of the system. All schools in California will benefit from increased knowledge about how to close the achievement gap and to raise all student achievement levels. Two additional web-based tools and sites are also to be launched shortly.

Third, as an example of piloting best practices, empowering local control, and assistance over compliance, we are engaging in a unique partnership with two of our largest school districts to give them increased flexibility in how they allocate their resources to meet the challenges they face. Both districts, Fresno and Long Beach, are committed to meeting certain benchmarks and goals as a condition of this new flexibility, and both districts will benefit from sharing and replicating effective strategies.

Thank you and I'm happy to respond to questions.