Governor Brown’s State of the State Address—Excerpts on K-12 Education

On January 24, Governor Brown delivered his State of the State Address to a joint session of the State Legislature. His remarks regarding K-12 education are worth highlighting as California embarks on major debates about school finance reform and changes to our student assessment and school accountability systems.

“In the right order of things, education--the early fashioning of character and the formation of conscience--comes before legislation. Nothing is more determinative of our future than how we teach our children. If we fail at this, we will sow growing social chaos and inequality that no law can rectify.

“In California’s public schools, there are six million students, 300,000 teachers--all subject to tens of thousands of laws and regulations. In addition to the teacher in the classroom, we have a principal in every school, a superintendent and governing board for each school district. Then we have the State Superintendent and the State Board of Education, which makes rules and approves endless waivers--often of laws which you just passed. Then there is the Congress which passes laws like "No Child Left Behind," and finally the Federal Department of Education, whose rules, audits and fines reach into every classroom in America, where sixty million children study, not six million.

“Add to this the fact that three million California school age children speak a language at home other than English and more than two million children live in poverty. And we have a funding system that is overly complex, bureaucratically driven and deeply inequitable. That is the state of affairs today.

“The laws that are in fashion demand tightly constrained curricula and reams of accountability data. All the better if it requires quiz-bits of information, regurgitated at regular intervals and stored in vast computers. Performance metrics, of course, are invoked like talismans. Distant authorities crack the whip, demanding quantitative measures and a stark, single number to encapsulate the precise achievement level of every child.

“We seem to think that education is a thing--like a vaccine--that can be designed from afar and simply injected into our children. But as the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats said, "Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire."
“This year, as you consider new education laws, I ask you to consider the principle of Subsidiarity. Subsidiarity is the idea that a central authority should only perform those tasks which cannot be performed at a more immediate or local level. In other words, higher or more remote levels of government, like the state, should render assistance to local school districts, but always respect their primary jurisdiction and the dignity and freedom of teachers and students.

“Subsidiarity is offended when distant authorities prescribe in minute detail what is taught, how it is taught and how it is to be measured. I would prefer to trust our teachers who are in the classroom each day, doing the real work - lighting fires in young minds.

“My 2013 Budget Summary lays out the case for cutting categorical programs and putting maximum authority and discretion back at the local level--with school boards. I am asking you to approve a brand new Local Control Funding Formula which would distribute supplemental funds -- over an extended period of time -- to school districts based on the real world problems they face. This formula recognizes the fact that a child in a family making $20,000 a year or speaking a language different from English or living in a foster home requires more help. Equal treatment for children in unequal situations is not justice.”

**State Board Adopts Common Core Math Standards**

As expected, on January 16, the State Board of Education approved revisions to California’s math standards to bring them in line with the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics. The action resolves two years of confusion during which California had grade 8 math standards that included both the common core standards and the algebra standards that had previously been in place in California. The Board’s action brings California into line with the national standards and is consistent with plans to implement student assessments based on the common core standards.

**Federal Action on Sequestration May Reduce Budget Cuts for Education**

Legislation approved by Congress and the President to delay the “sequestration” cuts may result in smaller cuts in federal funding for K-12 education in 2013-14. As originally approved, the sequestration cuts would have resulted in 2013-14 reductions of 8.2% in funding for ESEA and IDEA programs, among other key education programs. Several national education organizations have projected that the new legislation approved in late December will reduce the projected cuts to 5.9%. The President is required by law to release new sequestration projections in March.