

Riverside County State of Education Address

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Public Education: Investing in Our County's Future

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The theme for this year's State of Education Address is Public Education: Investing in Our County's Future. I believe this is an important message given the times we are in—especially here in California. Since the 1600s when the first public school was built in New England, the citizens of our country have been making sacrifices and investing heavily in public education. Those investments have paid huge dividends over the centuries.

Each of us has a vested interest in our public schools, and we continue to invest almost \$3 billion a year in Riverside County's public education system. We also invest hundreds of millions of dollars in the community colleges and state universities in our region. We have been willing to put our financial resources there because we believe a high-quality education will have a positive impact on the lives of students and society through the valuable contributions they make. We also invest in public education because others were unselfish enough to have made the investment in our education years ago.

Today, I hope to share with you some of the outstanding academic results that are taking place in our schools because of these investments. I also want to talk about a few of the major challenges facing public education and how we are working our way through them.

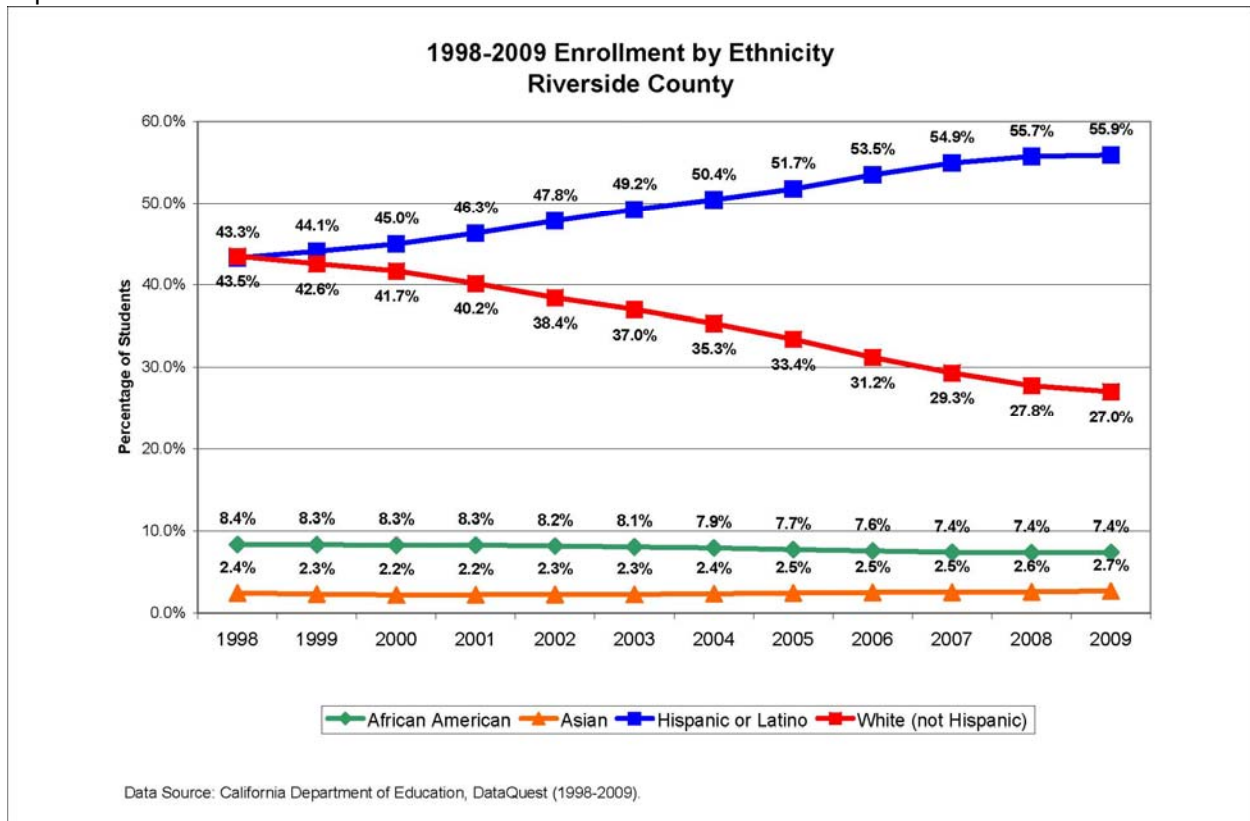
Let me begin by providing a backdrop for our discussion. Riverside County, with approximately 425,000 students, is the fourth largest public education system in California. Our county's student population exceeds the total student population of 17 states. Our 23 school districts have 486 elementary, middle and high schools, along with 70 alternative and charter schools spread across 7,200 square miles.

Serving as support and oversight agencies for the California Department of Education and the state's 1,000-plus local school districts are 58 county offices of education. Riverside County's office was established in 1893 when the county had just 1,200 students, mostly in one-room school houses. Back then, the office had just one employee—the elected county superintendent of schools.

With the passage of time, legislation placed more and more responsibilities on county superintendents, requiring them to hire staff to validate teaching credentials, instruct students in county-operated classrooms, oversee school district budgets, train district teachers and school site leaders, and perform a variety of other assignments. Eventually, elected county boards of education were added to the organization. Today, the combined functions of these

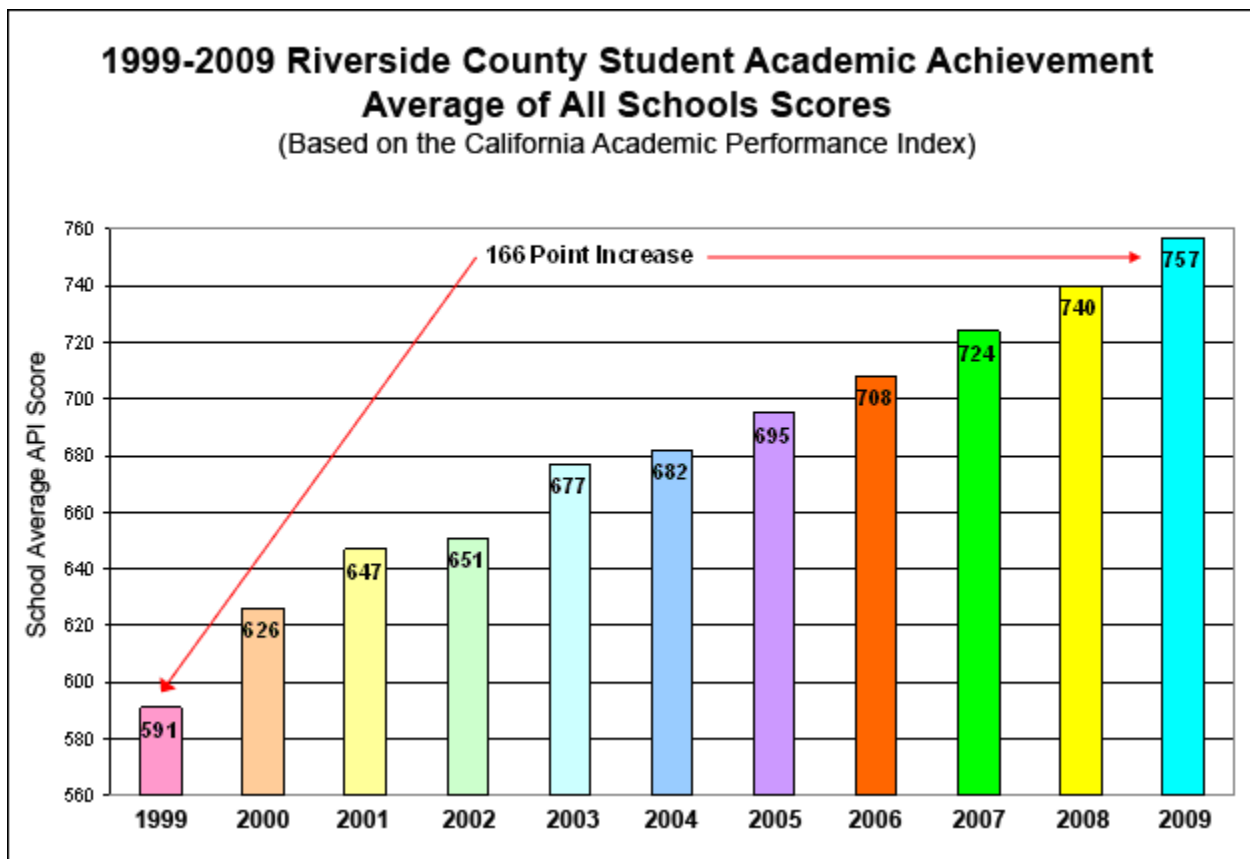
two elected offices in our county are referred to as the Riverside County Office of Education, or *RCOE*. The county superintendent oversees the operation of the county office and provides leadership to help realize the overarching educational aims of the entire county.

Our county's student demographics continue to change each year. Our Hispanic students, depicted by the blue line on the graph, have reached approximately 56 percent of our county's total enrollment. Our white students, in the red, make-up about 27 percent, 7.5 percent are African-American students, and about 2.5 percent are Asian. The remaining students represent a handful of other nationalities.



California's assessment system of student learning is known for its measurement scale: the Academic Performance Index or API. The API has a possible overall score ranging between 200 and 1,000. The state's goal is for every school in California to have an API score of at least 800. RCOE also compares student learning through the API data of counties. Of the 58 counties in California, 16 have a student enrollment between 80,000 and 1.6 million. These 16 counties are used for comparison and statewide ranking for the educational results of Riverside County's students.

Last year, the average school API score in our county was 757. That ranks us seventh out of the 16 comparison counties. Our county students made a 17-point increase in their API scores last year, the highest increase of any comparison county in the state! Between 1999, when the API first came out, and 2009, Riverside County's average school API score rose 166 points—the second-highest in the state.



If we could identify the single most powerful element in driving schools to sustain this high level of academic achievement, the answer would be their transformation into Professional Learning Communities. In a nutshell, PLCs, as they are called, are schools that function as communities of professionals who fully embrace the guiding principles of “What do we want students to learn?”, “How are we going to know if they’ve learned it?”, and “What are we going to do if they didn’t?”.

I would like to highlight Centennial High School in the Corona-Norco Unified School District, along with Mr. Sam Buenrostro, one of the most outstanding high school principals in the state, for obtaining national recognition as a model PLC school. The state average API increase for high schools between 1999 and 2009 was 113 points. Centennial increased 195 points! But, as Paul Harvey used to say, “Here is the rest of the story”. Their African-American student scores increased 223 points, their Hispanic students increased 217 points, their Economically Disadvantaged students went up 214 points and their white student scores went up by 179 points. They are clearly closing the academic achievement gap! As Principal Buenrostro points out, “PLC practices can in fact make a significant difference in large ethnically and socio-economically diverse high school communities.”

Students will tell you it makes all the difference in the world when their teachers believe in them, and we have outstanding teachers in our county who believe in their students. Last year, one of Riverside County's finest teachers was selected to represent us at the California State Teacher of the Year competition. She became a finalist, and, she was selected! She

teaches World History at Chemawa Middle School in the Riverside Unified School District. We are proud to acknowledge Amber Carrow as one of California's State Teachers of the Year.

As part of No Child Left Behind, the federal assessment of student learning is primarily based on proficiency in English Language Arts and Mathematics. Last year, the county-wide average proficiency rate in English Language Arts was 52 percent. That is a 5.4 percent increase over the prior year—the highest increase of any comparison county in the state, and a 24 percent increase since this assessment was introduced in 2002—also the highest increase of any comparison county. In math, our county proficiency rate was 53.9 percent. That is a 23.1 percent increase since 2002—the third-highest increase of any comparison county.

Speaking of remarkable results, the Romoland School District is one of our county's special success stories this year. Even with 70 percent of their students living in economically disadvantaged circumstances and about 40 percent learning the English language, they were able to meet all of the NCLB requirements at each of their schools this year. That is a remarkable feat.

Another district success story is the Coachella Valley Unified School District. They have been under a State Board of Education-appointed Trustee (the Riverside County Superintendent of Schools) for the past two years because the district's students had not met the academic requirements of NCLB. I am pleased to report that the district's students have made substantial improvement in their academics since 2007. Next month, I will be submitting a letter to the State Board of Education recommending that the Trustee assignment be discontinued effective July 1st and full control of the district be restored to their local board of education.

As parents, students and school districts search for creative and effective educational options, sometimes the results come in the formation of charter schools. One of the more unique charter schools in our county that is doing very well educationally is the California Military Institute operated by the Perris Union High School District. CMI is affiliated with the California Cadet Corps, which is the Junior ROTC program of the California National Guard. However, CMI departs from the traditional idea of a military school being a place for troubled or at-risk youth.

While it has a strong military element of leadership, respect and self-discipline, including wearing uniforms and following military protocols, CMI is not a boot camp. It is a high-quality educational environment. Students, or cadets as they're referred to, come because they want to learn in a different educational and social atmosphere. If you want to know what that different atmosphere is like, just visit the campus and see how the cadets behave during passing period or at lunchtime. Prospective cadets are recruited to apply, and those who successfully complete a summer preparation process are then accepted. Their current enrollment is over 500 and about 150 prospective cadets apply each year. CMI operates in grades 7 through 12, but they will be expanding to include sixth graders next year.



State and federal accountability have become the primary lenses through which most of the education community views our schools today. But by and large, that is not how the rest of the world looks at it. What we keep hearing over and over again from our stakeholders is: “What percentage of our students are graduating from high school?”, “How are they doing in their college-prep classes?”, “How are they scoring on the ACT and SAT tests?”, and, “Are students getting trade skills or technical education to prepare them for the workforce?”. In summary, the outside world is most interested in educational outcomes that have long-lasting meaning in real life. To our stakeholders, high school graduation is Number One—linked with college preparedness and workforce readiness.

Last year, the Riverside County Office of Education introduced what we call our Pledge to the stakeholders in our county. The Pledge is that *All students in Riverside County will graduate from high school well-prepared for college and the workforce*. While our office continually strives to provide support services to schools and school districts to help them meet state and federal compliance requirements, our larger emphasis is on long-term outcomes that have lifelong relevance to students, parents and communities. This provides a more strategic objective for our efforts in preschool, in elementary school and in secondary grades. Let's take a look at the available data for our county's academic results in the Pledge areas.

Our county's high school graduation rate last year was 80.5 percent. That puts us 8th out of our comparison counties. Our graduation rate target for this school year is 83.1 percent, a 2.5-percent increase over 2009. That would move us up to fifth place with comparison counties.

But our five-year goal is to have the highest graduation rate out of any comparable county in the state!

The most recent year college data is available was 2008. That year, our county had approximately 23,600 high school graduates. Of those, about 29.5 percent completed the course requirements for entrance to a California public university. Approximately 44 percent of our graduates went on to enroll at one of the state's universities or community colleges. From this combined data, our county's college *preparedness* rate was about 36.5 percent, ranking us 10th. While we realize this is 2008 data, our county's college preparedness target for 2010 is just over 40 percent, a 3.8-percent increase. Our 10-year goal is to have the highest college preparedness rate of any comparable county in California.

A rather unique route to college is found at the Nuvview Bridge Early College High School located in the Nuvview Union School District. This district-operated charter school is mostly composed of students who are traditionally underrepresented in college populations. This includes those with low levels of parent education; students from minority families; students living in poverty; and students experiencing transiency or homelessness. Despite these obstacles, this Early College High School is ranked Number One in California in terms of college credits earned on a per student basis. In each of their recent high school graduating classes, at least 25 percent of the students have simultaneously graduated with Associates degrees from the Moreno Valley campus of Riverside Community College!

Another school that is starting early in building a college-bound mindset among students and families is Perris Elementary School. They have adopted what is called a “no excuses” philosophy at their school—students do not have excuses for not going to college. Every classroom has adopted a college to research and cheer for, and the college becomes a partner for the classroom. Officials from the college send letters and memorabilia, including shirts, to help encourage the students to attend college and to let them know college is a real possibility for every one of them. Principal Tiffany Martinez notes: “Because many of our students come from backgrounds where college has never been an option, this endeavor is one that goes beyond academics—it speaks to creating hope for each child. It is our dream to make college a reality for all of our students. Each teacher also has a college flag that they hang outside of their classroom door during the day, and the students wear their college shirts to school on Fridays. Teachers are committed to finding new ways to bring college standards to life at each grade level.”



One of the most effective strategies for getting students into college is known as AVID, short for Advancement Via Individual Determination. AVID is an in-school academic support program that targets students who are capable of completing rigorous curriculum but are falling short of their potential. Typically, they will be the first in their families to attend college, and many are from low-income or minority families. It pulls the students out of their unchallenging courses and puts them on a college-bound pathway early in life, and helps them stay on it.

The AVID Program at San Jacinto High School has doubled in size over the last five years. When school started this year, over 300 students were enrolled in AVID. Last year, San Jacinto AVID seniors recorded a 96-percent acceptance rate to four-year universities; 100 percent planned to attend either a two- or four-year college. In addition, the school's AVID seniors were awarded numerous grants and scholarships including two Dell Scholarships and the coveted Gates Millennium Scholarship. Class of 2009 valedictorian, Alegria Granha, a Gates Millennium Scholar and four-year AVID student, is currently a pre-med student at UCLA. In 2003, Palo Verde Valley High School had its first senior AVID class. Of the 11 students enrolled, 10 received college acceptances. Today Palo Verde High has 140 students enrolled in AVID.

As we begin to increase our college preparedness rate, our students are being faced with a significant challenge—the lack of college capacity. The state is not only cutting funding to our K-12 schools, it is cutting funding for our community colleges and universities, and university

tuition is going up sharply. This restricts the number of students the schools can enroll. Our county is very fortunate to have an incredible education infrastructure with 486 high quality K-12 schools, four outstanding community college districts, four nationally recognized universities along with a number of great private colleges for our students. But if students cannot afford to attend or if the schools do not have enrollment capacity, then they might as well be located ten-thousand miles away.

The most practical way to quickly expand capacity is at the community college level. For a growing number of students, that is their pathway into the university. They can complete the general education requirements at the community colleges for a fraction of the cost of university credits. It is also a highly successful means for them to complete technical training.

We already have 58 comprehensive high schools located across our county. They look like community colleges in size and functionality. They are located right where the students live. In many cases, the custodial crews are already on campus in the evenings cleaning the schools so the additional operating costs would be fairly minimal. I believe many of our school districts would be receptive to the idea of having community college classes there in the evenings because it helps their students. But our community colleges are at full capacity in the number of students they can serve because of funding. They are prohibited by the state from increasing their capacity to serve our students because of the \$26-per-unit tuition cap—which is the lowest in the nation. By allowing community colleges to augment that by just 2.5 cents a day, which is about the equivalent of the cost for one text message every 24 hours, we can increase college enrollment by the thousands.

The graduation and college goals for our county are very lofty, but I believe they are also very obtainable. We just have to want it for our students and then we must work together as a county-wide educational team to accomplish them. We're much stronger working together than when we're operating individually. Just like the U.S. Olympic hockey team playing Finland up in Canada right this very minute. Each player is exceptionally talented, but if they don't work together as a team, someone else will bring home the gold. There is no reason why we cannot eventually achieve the educational gold standard with our students in our county. There are no excuses.

Now, the third area of the Pledge-triad is workforce readiness. You will notice I did not include data on it along with the other two goals. California does not currently have statewide measurements for career technical education completion or competency standards. If workforce readiness is something we are really serious about, then we need to be able to rate and rank our efforts in Career Technical Education. RCOE has been working with the state to identify specific types of academic and job training skills data that can be utilized to track and assess workforce readiness. We are confident this effort will result in a statewide measurement system in the next 18 to 24 months. In the mean time, we will be piloting a prototype here in Riverside County.

Another aspect of this focus is certification. Many students need a meaningful document certifying to prospective employers that they have been properly trained in specific workforce

fields. RCOE is working with the County Workforce Investment Board and other industry representatives to develop just such a certificate. We expect to have this in place about the same time the statewide measurement system is in operation—if not sooner.

Now, I would like to shift gears and talk about some of the challenges we are facing today in education. For the last several years, the state API and the federal proficiency movement have essentially taken over the focus of California's K-12 public education system. The Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999, which established state standards and the API, is soon up for reauthorization by the legislature. California has already made the decision to move from our current state content standards, which are among the most rigorous in the country, to national standards. This means adopting new standards which the whole nation can agree to. It probably means rewriting most of our textbooks and assessments. That would mean training teachers on the new standards and developing new classroom lesson plans, instructional pacing guides and benchmark assessments. That will likely require billions of dollars from an unknown source. It could take years to properly implement, and it will require overhauling much, if not all of the current API system. And this is occurring at a time when school districts are cutting millions upon millions of dollars from their budgets.

In conjunction with this comes the federal Race to the Top initiative and Congress's expected reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which we know today as No Child Left Behind. These will have a significant impact on every state's public education system. California has expressed a desire to convert from the two overlapping systems we have today to one federally modeled system. The federal model will have more accountability in it than the state model currently has, and we must increase accountability if our students are to produce the educational outcomes needed to compete globally.

As your County Superintendent, I want to express my deep concern over the incremental loss of local control of our public education system to Washington. Public education in this country has always operated on the principles of local control. But with the gradual infusion of federal funds, and through the requirement of states to implement federal compliance mandates whenever schools receive federal funds, that is exactly what is taking place.

Our President has established what I would consider to be very laudable long-range goals for the outcome of public education. These include preparing students to succeed in college and the workplace, and to compete in the global economy. Those goals are in complete alignment with RCOE's Pledge which I shared with you earlier. However, I believe those long-range goals should be established and supported at the state and county levels rather than being driven at the federal level. The ramifications of this movement have resulted in a significant erosion of local school district control over the education of students in this state. When we talk about student academic achievement next year our context may be entirely different than it has been for the past 10 years.

I want to share some thoughts about another challenge that is affecting our students, and in many ways, it is the most critical challenge we're facing. It is called home. Starting in kindergarten, we typically see a very high level of parental or caregiver involvement and

support in their children's education. This is often a reflection of how involved parents are in their children's lives in general. But as children progress through school, with their various stages of development and with changes in their circles of friends, parents often have difficulty adjusting to these changes. As a child approaches graduation from high school, on an average, parents' involvement in their child's schooling drops to less than 50 percent.

These are very challenging times to be a parent or a youth—especially here in California. Schools can be many things to many people, but they cannot be an effective substitute for parents or caregivers. I commend those schools that have found collaborative ways to involve parents in not just their children's education, but in all important aspects of their lives. I would also like to acknowledge those who have taken the initiative to offer quality parenting classes and programs to their communities. Just think what a difference it would make in our society if every school had and promoted an ongoing parenting program.

To help schools more effectively address this challenge, the Riverside County Office of Education has entered into a partnership with the 23rd District PTA to develop a high quality parent involvement program that will eventually be offered to schools throughout the county. The concept of the partnership is that RCOE and PTA will provide the materials and training to parent facilitators from schools. Those facilitators will then work with their principals and site staff to recruit parents to attend and participate in the trainings. Our collective goal is to begin offering this support to schools in the fall, with a few schools being pilots for the first cohort. We will also be holding a large-scale, inexpensive, Parent Involvement Summit later in the year to help launch this effort.

I would like to close with some comments about the state's bottomless financial crisis and its long-term effect on public education. Let me begin by putting this in a historical context. Herbert Hoover's term as President was just months old when the nation sustained the most ruinous business collapse in U.S. history. At year's end, investors in the stock market had lost nearly \$40 billion—and that was in 1929, when the cost of a brand new Chevy was under \$700! Following the crash, the United States continued to decline into the most profound depression in American history. Banks failed and millions of citizens suddenly had no savings. Factories locked their gates, shops were shuttered forever, and most remaining businesses struggled to survive. Local governments faced enormous difficulty with collecting taxes just to keep basic services going.

The president, along with other elected officials, attempted to infuse confidence in the public by predicting that recovery was imminent, but the nation's economic condition slowly and steadily deteriorated. By the beginning of the new decade, 25 percent of Americans were looking for work. Remember, the U.S. population in 1930 was only 123 million. There were roughly 30.8 million Americans unemployed back then. Today the U.S. population is approximately 308 million and at 10.5 percent unemployment, over 32 million people are out of work!

The homeless, including children, crisscrossed the country by the hundreds of thousands. One of the major reasons so many adolescents were on the road was because a time-honored pillar

of communities—the school house—was closed. Money to pay teachers and operate classrooms had evaporated. Most public schools in the U.S. ended their 1933-34 school year in January of 1934! Close to 5,000 schools were closed for the whole year! Between 1930 and 1934, America lost more than 25,000 school teachers to the depression—an astronomical figure in those days—the equivalent of 50,000 teachers today. And roughly 40 percent of high school-age students did not attend in school in 1935.

Since the 1970s, public education in California has become heavily dependent on the state budget for funding. Based on economic analysis from all corners of the nation, the current recession in California still has a distance to go before we start to see reliable signs of a true recovery. Our state is experiencing a deeper economic decline than most of the nation because our economy has become imbalanced and frail over the years. The state budget is heavily dependent on income and sales taxes for revenues. Revenues are down because people in California are not working or earning as much as they were. They're having a harder time getting credit, and they're not buying as they were. All of this affects public education.

Last month, the Legislative Analyst's Office reported a \$6.6 billion deficit in the current state budget through June 30 and another \$12.3 billion deficit for next year. It also forecast a deficit of about \$20 billion in 2011-2012. The proposed state budget that was released last month banks on huge amounts of federal income that are highly unlikely to materialize. It contains over \$8.5 billion in cuts that will be rock hard to get approved, and another \$4 billion in what I would refer to as “imaginary” revenues.

On top of this, the state is deferring billions of dollars in payments to schools by several months because they are having a major cash-flow problem. This multi-billion dollar cut and defer cycle for education is now in its third year. We have all been reading about the deep cuts local school districts are making because of additional reductions in state funding next year. Riverside County schools have already lost over \$700 million in state funding before this next round of cutting kicks in.

Our school districts are doing everything they can to cut costs and at the same time keep their high quality educational efforts in place. But with the magnitude of the funding cuts they have been taking, they too are reaching the point where they are forced to reduce the number of days in the school year. Without additional funding, there is nothing else they can realistically do. The State of Hawaii has already reduced its school year by 17 days. On all of the islands, every Friday between now and the middle of June, school will be out.

After living in Riverside County for the past 30 years and raising six children, one of the things I have learned is that our public schools are deeply committed to ensuring the success of all students that come through the doors. Overall, we have a very dedicated and capable education workforce. No matter how difficult it gets, our county schools will find the way to get through this crisis and come out as a stronger, more effective, more unified educational system. I have full faith in this, and with help from Above, we will succeed.

