

*Los Angeles Unified School District
Board of Education*



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President

Marlene Canter's remarks to the
Presidents' Joint Commission on LAUSD Governance
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Good evening, and thank you again for your commitment, your time, your interest, and for inviting me back.

This conversation about the future of our public schools is the most important conversation in town.

I have been in education for 30-plus years and my comments tonight will reflect that experience.

As one of the new Joint Presidents of this commission, I want to share with you my thoughts on education reform and the governance options you're considering.

I also want to share with you about our work as we embark on a superintendent search.

First, it is very important for us to reframe the conversation: We are a district on the move – and we're moving up!

In 1998, we were a failing district. Our test scores were flat, more than 25 percent of our teachers were inexperienced and on emergency credentials, learning on the job. Proposition BB had passed, but was badly mismanaged. We were bursting at the seams, and thousands of kids were on buses for more than two hours a day.

Now in 2006, we have made many transformations. This has happened under a stable and capable superintendent who has served twice the average tenure of urban superintendents nation wide and through 3 different mayor administrations. And it has happened under a board that has developed a vision for the district and has given strong support to Romer's theory of action.

Much has been accomplished. But we still have more to go.

Today I want to share with you what I have learned from my years as both a classroom teacher in LAUSD and from my 25 years training teachers throughout the country. My experience is deep and broad, as I have spent my career in and out of classrooms nationwide.

These are what I feel are the most important levers for change. Whereas governance can be tweaked, these cannot. They are a must for anyone who professes to live with urgency as I do when it comes to our kids.

1. **We must have a quality teacher in every classroom.** Recent studies show that nationwide, our poorest students are 2.5 more likely to have a lower performing teacher. This is unacceptable. We must recruit the best and the brightest; assign teachers based on students' needs, not adults' needs; hold everyone accountable for performance; retain the best teachers and weed out the ineffective ones; and create a career ladder that keeps the best teachers in the classroom with children for their entire careers and creates incentives for the best teachers to tackle the toughest assignments.

2. **We must have a high-performing principal in every school** that is held accountable and is able to work collaboratively with teachers and parents and still have the authority over the school site. This will involve a) enlarging our pipeline of capable leaders, b) changing our selection process from one of seat time to one of rigorous recruitment and selection, c) dramatically improving our principal training, d) and creating performance contracts that are linked to our goals. With high performing principals we will be able to offer more authority over the school site.

3. **We must look to Higher Education to reform** their education and teacher training curriculum to address the challenges that our teachers face today in the 21st century. This may mean looking at other professional models of training such as medicine that rely much more on the internship process.

4. **We must find a better way to engage all parents** in their children's education. Teachers and principals must be held accountable for engaging all parents – not only in schools, but at home. Schools must find a way to reach out and connect to our parent community. One example, have each teacher call all parents before the school year begins and welcome them. 'My name is Mrs. Canter and I will be your child's teacher this year. I want to make this the best year your child has had. I want to work together with you. Tell me what I need to know about your child.' Engage them in the process. This little investment, I promise, will go a long way.

5. **We must all find a way to work more collaboratively with the unions.** Union protections were developed before accountability became a practice. With principals accountable for student performance, discipline of teachers won't be arbitrary and unfair. We also need to shift to a new paradigm that takes us from zero sum bargaining based on adult needs to interest based bargaining driven by kids' needs. On top of my own personal list is to do away with the "must place teachers" and the "dance of the lemons" where ineffective teachers and principals are transferred from school to school. Both are unacceptable practices. We have already begun this process of reform with our new UTLA leadership and other unions.

6. **We must all be held accountable for the results of our actions.** We must all commit to high standards for all of our kids. For example the Board of Education is developing a dashboard to monitor our progress in reaching the district's performance goals. We are also creating a citizen's budget so that everyone can see how the money is spent. We must have budgets that are program-driven and understandable to all. Although 92 percent of our general fund dollars are already at the school site, we must hold principals accountable for spending the money effectively. To that end, I am happy to say that by January 2007 we will have technology in place so that for the principal

they will be able to see exactly what they have in the budget in real time, just like an ATM.

7. Lastly, we must all work together – cities, parents, community groups – on behalf of the kids. We need to create and strengthen formal partnerships, working together, with our goals aligned, so that everything we do is to ensure that all kids will graduate from high school with the skills that they need to be productive citizens. Let's use San Francisco as an example. When Gavin Newsom recognized that schools were the key to the future of the city's economic development, he decided to refrain from finger-pointing and declaring failure. He moved to frame the conversation around embracing the schools and doing his part to ensure success. Now today, the city has raised money and is supporting the schools. I encourage you to learn more about it.

Now let me discuss your seven areas of governance change:

1. Changing the characteristics of the school board – All of the above should drive the policies of an elected school board. We are the elected officials that represent the rights of children exclusively. I encourage you to find ways to enhance the work of elected officials and to find ways to encourage the voting process so that the constituents take advantage of this right.

2. Safety – This continues to be the most important issue we all face. I cannot look you in the eye and say that all of our kids can safely walk from their house to school – many of them walk through many gang areas. We **MUST** coordinate our efforts. Mapping has shown us that more crime happens around the schools than on the school site. It is unacceptable that as a city, this is not a top priority. School Board Member Mike Lansing has initiated a working committee with the City and County that must be a focal point to address this and other safety issues. Now – I urge you to all to weigh in on this.

3. Decentralization – This is a very popular topic of conversation for most reformers and other educators today – as it has been on and off throughout my career. I think when we talk about decentralization it's important to define the term.

I envision high-performing principals who are held accountable for student performance and who have greater authority over their budgets, staff and operations of their school.

I would caution, however, against totally decentralizing curriculum. We must remain vigilant in supporting the theory of action that the district has been using the last six years – we must find a balance between maintaining a managed, standards-based curriculum that is working for our kids and the flexibility that allows for teacher input when appropriate.

I would also caution against decentralizing certain back office functions. Do we really want our principals worrying about negotiating contracts to get their garbage collected? Large contracts often utilize economies of scale.

When we're talking about decentralization, we also need to define who makes the decisions: principals, neighborhood councils, site based councils or a combination. Empowering principals with more budget flexibility can be a very positive thing – but not without building capacity, providing training, and expecting accountability.

4. Mayoral Involvement – This is a must. Each day the Mayor is not working with us is another day we are cheating the kids.

5. Formal Collaboration – Absolutely a necessity. One example: We're adding more than 800 acres of green space to this region with our building program – it's an

unprecedented opportunity for the City's Department of Recreation and Parks to partner with us to keep this space open in the evenings and on weekends.

6. **Finance** – We must all use our collective power to make sure we get the money needed to effectively educate our children. California ranks in the bottom half of the nation for per pupil funding, and our kids need additional resources from the City, State and Federal government. Right now 85 percent of our funding comes from the state.

7. **Other Cities** – All of these collaboration efforts must include strong ties to each of the 27 cities Los Angeles Unified serves.

Lastly – Let me fill you in on our Superintendent search. I am confident that we will find the best superintendent in the nation for this job. I have already had numerous inquiries.

The community input phase of the search is about to begin. From now through May, we will be surveying the public and interviewing a broad base of opinion leaders to solicit input on what qualities are important. From that input, we will write the new superintendent's job description.

From May through August, we will be entering a recruitment and selection phase. The board has hired a search firm – Hamilton, Rabinovitz & Alshuler – to lead the entire process.

Our goal is to have a new Superintendent in place by the fall. We will be looking for a giant to stand on the shoulders of Roy Romer – and to continue moving our district forward.

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