

Legislation Conference Urges Lawmakers to Invest in Children

The California State PTA held its annual Legislation Conference in Sacramento February 22-24, 2009, just days after the Governor signed the state's new budget on February 20.

More than 100 PTA leaders attended the conference, which included meetings with legislators to invite them into schools throughout California to see how the new budget hurts children.

"Cutting billions of dollars from education and children's services may balance a budget, but it does not even remotely meet the responsibility of California to educate and care for children," said Pam Brady, president of the California State PTA. "No one should be proud of a budget that drops funding for schools to dead last in the nation."

During the conference, the PTA issued a press release announcing the first steps in a campaign to fix the economic gridlock:

- Removal of the two-thirds majority vote of the legislature to pass a budget;
- Lowering of the threshold to pass local parcel taxes to a supermajority of 55 percent; and
- Restructuring of California's school finance system.

"The PTA believes the smartest economic recovery plan is to invest in children," Brady said. "All children should have arts, small class sizes, counselors, nurses, librarians, and yes – textbooks – and this budget forces communities to fight over crumbs."

Those who attended the three-day conference heard from a range of expert speakers, including the following.

Julia Brownley, Assembly Education
Chairman
Joan Buchanan, Assembly Member
Rachel Ehlers, Legislative Analyst's Office
Michael Genest, Director of Finance
Kevin Gordon, School Innovations &
Advocacy
Mark Leno, Senator
Rick Miller, Deputy Superintendent,
California Department of Education
John Mockler, Secretary, EdSource
Roger Niello, Assembly Member
Mary Perry, EdSource
John Rogers, Associate Professor, UCLA
Gloria Romero, Senate Majority Leader
Jean Ross, California Budget Project
Brad Strong, Education Director,
Children Now

Say what? Memorable moments at Conference

Despite the dire outlook for funding of schools and other children's services, the PTA Legislation Conference offered many memorable, even humorous, moments. You really had to be there to hear and see the following.

And you thought the algebra standards were tough

" 'Linear regression' is going to be in the state constitution." – Jean Ross, California Budget Project, describing one aspect of the spending-cap initiative that is slated for the ballot in May as part of the budget deal.

Best definition of "flexibility" for school districts

"Telling us we can do what we want with the money you're not giving us." – from a PTA and school board member speaking during a Q&A with Sen. Gloria Romero and Assembly member Julia Brownley.

Learning or lockup

"If we do not educate, we will incarcerate." – Sen. Gloria Romero

Investing in education

"Test scores gave a better return than the market." – John Mockler of EdSource, describing the academic performance of California's students in recent years.

Numbers ...

"Data is a necessity; it's not a luxury." – Rick Miller, with the California Department of Education (CDE).

... and how they add up

"Thousands are back in school today because of data." – Rick Miller of CDE, illustrating the previous point. He explained that the individual student data system (CALPADS) has encouraged districts to check out if students ostensibly transferring out of districts really re-enroll elsewhere and don't just disappear (drop out), because these "lost transfers" now end up as dropout statistics from the last district they were enrolled in.

Best visual

Fancy footwork by California State PTA President-elect Jo Loss, illustrating the need to take the achievement gap out of the closet and put it at the center of our concerns. Loss used shoes as props to make her point, saying we used to treat the achievement gap as a quiet little number like her dainty pump, which is easy to overlook and forget in the back of the armoire, but in fact, we need to see it for what it is, a huge issue worthy of our attention, rather like her son's enormous, neon-colored athletic shoe.