

Premier Gordon Campbell
Address to the B.C. School Superintendents Association
Victoria
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It is wonderful to have an opportunity to talk to you about education, and it is surprising to me that other premiers haven't spoken to you in the past. Superintendents are the educational leaders of our school boards, and I think you do an exceptional job. You clearly have been the heavy lifters in the school system, and as leaders, I know that your interest in educational reform and in what education can do is similar to the educational ideas and commitment we all share in British Columbia.

I think most British Columbians understand that one of our great assets is a strong and a vital public education system. The best job creation program that's been invented by humankind, so far, is a good public education system. It's the best preventive health-care program, it's the best early childhood development program, and it's the best anti-poverty program.

Public education is a way that we liberate people to pursue their goals and their dreams. I can't think of any area of public endeavour that can be as rewarding and as exciting as being involved in public education.

John Gardiner, who I'm sure you all know, once wrote about the purpose of education. He said that we should "dedicate ourselves to the release of human potential, the enhancement of individual dignity, the liberation of the human spirit and the harnessing of the human imagination."

Think of what we could give our children if we could meet all of those objectives – if we could say to the young people of our province, "We are able to provide you with the tools you need to pursue your dreams."

As people talk about educational reform in British Columbia, I think it's important for us to recognize that it's not because public education has not met the objectives of the province; it's because there's so much more we can do if we work together and liberate the imagination of our educators and our students and the people we serve.

We think education is of critical importance to our future. But equally, we think that the role that you play in your school districts as educational leaders is of critical importance.

There are very few professions that can be as rewarding as being a teacher. When I was in Nigeria, I taught English, history, and the equivalent of current events to secondary school students. I immediately came face to face with institutional responses to individual issues, which were interesting, to say the least.

We taught *Julius Caesar*. We taught *A Christmas Carol*. And we did one session on West African poets, which was great.

The West African culture doesn't have much of a sense of irony: sarcasm doesn't cross their minds. I was teaching *Julius Caesar* to them, and I was trying to get across the idea of the famous speech by Mark Antony: "Friends, Romans, countrymen." You'll recall there's a subtle bit in there about the will Caesar left.

My students didn't care about the will and didn't understand much about it. So I refashioned that speech around notes, because in Nigeria what they really thought was important was notes. I had no illusions: they didn't really care what I was saying, as long as they could write it down in notes.

The first day I walked into the school, I saw one of the teachers writing on the blackboard, and he was looking at his notes. I looked later, and his teaching material was Coles Notes, which he was copying onto the board and the students were copying. I didn't think that was a particularly good way of engaging kids.

But I started to do this speech with them, and I went through it, and I knew this was working because the bell rang and they stayed in their seats. They did not move. I finished the speech, and they all applauded, and they all cheered.

I picked up my books, and I walked out the front door, and one of my students ran up to me and said: "Sir, this literature is too, too interesting." I saw that sparkle in his eyes. You know you've reached someone, and I was sure that gave his imagination a little bit of a spark and took him down different roads that led to an enhancement of his life.

That connection is something every teacher in the province is looking for and is rewarded by. I know that each of you, as superintendents, is trying to create an environment where that can take place, providing for over 500,000 students across our province.

I want to say, on behalf of my colleagues and the public you serve: Thank you for the time and effort you put in, because there's nothing more important to our future.

It's important for us to know that as the world changes, we have to change. It's important for us to look at the results we're getting from the system and think of how we can improve, even though I know of lots of good things that are working in the system and lots of students who are doing well.

We've enhanced the performance of our students over the last generation. To do that in a public education system, I think you have to open it up to the public.

The first teachers all of us have are our parents. If we can incorporate our parents into our public education system in a way that's positive and constructive, students do better.

As a government, we have tried to make sure our school system is open to parents – to their contributions, to their ideas, to the objectives they have for their children.

We also understand that you can't impose solutions from outside. So we've tried to create a more open and accountable system of education in which we say to different school districts: "Pursue your program in the way that you see success for your children in your communities." We believe that's important.

The educational funding formula changes we've made were aimed at reducing the kind of micromanagement that was taking place down to the local levels. We think you, your boards and your parents know what's best for the students you're serving.

We want to ensure that we not only bring together parents and teachers and superintendents and trustees, but the public at large.

Last year, for the first time, we had the legislative committee on education tour the province. That committee had not been out around British Columbia since the 1970s.

Education is the most important area of public service we have – not the most expensive, but the most important. We hadn't had a legislative committee encouraging people to participate and talk about things that they and we could do to improve the system since March 24, 1971.

In that time, my two sons were born, went through the public education system and graduated – without the public once being engaged in a discussion with the legislative committee.

We also hosted a dialogue on education. The public were there, superintendents were there, teachers were there, and university educators were there to talk about new ideas in meeting our public objectives of creating the best public education system anywhere.

In exposing the public to those ideas, we exposed them to new opportunities and new approaches to the challenges we face.

We live in a world of massive stimulation. We have to connect with our young people right across the province, regardless of where they live. We want to make sure aboriginal children have the kind of educational future we want for everyone.

For example, when we look at our aboriginal students, we see a 38 per cent graduation rate. We have failed those young people – not you personally, or me personally, but societally. We have an obligation to work with aboriginal parents, leaders and educators to move that aboriginal graduation rate up so it's equivalent to the non-aboriginal graduation rate.

But at the same time we're doing that, we have to look at our non-aboriginal graduation rate – where approximately one in four children don't graduate – and see how we can give them the tools and programs they need to succeed.

Now, I know the first response we get back is: "All we need is more resources." I understand that more resources are always nice. I also understand that if we don't get our financial house in order in the province, we will start losing the resources we need to provide for public education and health services.

And so we're going to continue down the path of what we think is financial prudence. We're trying to open up the flexibility, the accountability and the opportunities for people on the ground floor and at the local level to make choices they think are most appropriate for the students they serve.

We have a great opportunity to build a new, flexible, exciting public education system that allows people in the Kootenays, or the Fraser Valley, or the Northwest to come up with different ways to meet their educational needs – a system that recognizes the challenges we face in urban areas and rural areas in providing people with the tools they need to accomplish their goals.

I want to congratulate all of you for the work you've done over the last year in establishing accountability contracts. I understand the difficulties in putting those documents together; I understand they may well be flawed – but I think they are important for the public because they allow people to see what we are trying to do. They open up the doors to public education in a way that says to everyone: "Join with us as we strive to reach these objectives. Join with us as we strive to provide the variety of opportunities and choices that's required for children to learn and for teachers to teach, and for school districts to respond to the needs of the people they serve."

In this province we've had a significant debt load. That debt load costs about \$7.2 million a day. If we can get our financial house in order, we will be in a position where we can enhance the tools we have available to meet the needs of our children.

As superintendents you face constant pressures imposed by the province as we look to improve and reform our education system, and by your parents and your teachers. I recognize how much work you've done in the last year to help them as we move to make sure we have a public education system that's second to none.

I want to thank you for your leadership, and for the contribution you make. I want to thank you for consistently performing on behalf of your students and your school boards and your districts in a way that reflects not just your professionalism but your excitement about public education.

I hope we can all join together to do what Marian Wright Edelman, the founder of the Children's Defense Fund in the United States, has described as "putting one foot ahead of

the other, basking in the beauty of our children, in the chance to serve and engage in a struggle for a purpose higher than ourselves.”

I know you do that each day when you go to work, and I want to thank you for the contribution you make to all of our lives. Thank you very much.