

# A Commitment to Students First

The foundation for every finding and recommendation in this report is equity — the deeply held personal conviction of each and every Committee member that all children in California should have access to a high-quality education.

Public education is, first and foremost, the great equalizer, the door-opener, and the foundation of human dignity. Adherence to America’s most cherished social, political, and cultural democratic norms demands genuine access to quality education for all students, undifferentiated by class, race, or geography. Public education functions properly only when it enables every child to reach his or her full intellectual, professional, and personal growth potential. It is not enough that the benefits of education *theoretically* be available to all students; the benefits must be real, or else the promise is empty. The California Supreme Court, in *Serrano v. Priest* more than three decades ago, was profound in declaring that public education constitutes “the bright hope for entry of the poor and the oppressed into the mainstream of American society.”

Second, excellent education for all is an economic necessity, even more so in an age of globalization when technology is blurring the traditional boundaries of geography, and demonstrated knowledge, capacity, and skill — not location — decides who advances and who falls behind. Given that our economy increasingly relies on the contributions of citizens who traditionally have been underserved by the public education system — Blacks, Latinos, the poor, and those whose native language is not English — we can especially ill afford to write off these students as expendable, which effectively is what the public school system has done for generations, through a structured pattern of disparities of opportunity and associated outcomes.

Third, equal education for all is a constitutional right. California’s first constitution in 1849 asserted that “A general diffusion of knowledge and intelligence being essential to the preservation of rights and liberties of the people, the Legislature shall encourage by all suitable means the promotion of intellectual, scientific, moral, and agricultural improvement.” Since then, the state’s Supreme Court has found that “the common schools are doorways opening into chambers of science, art, and the learned professions, as well as into fields of industrial and commercial activities. Opportunities for securing employment are often more or less dependent upon the rating that a youth, as a pupil of our public institutions, has received in his school work. These are rights and privileges that cannot be denied.”

Fourth, equity is meaningless unless it is accompanied by excellence. That California’s school system differentiates among students is cause enough for alarm and broad-scale transformation, but the situation is actually far graver. While California unquestionably has a two-tiered educational system, that is not to say that all children in the upper tier are receiving an education of sufficient rigor, enrichment, encouragement, and challenge. Though exceptions surely exist, the education being received by Californian children of *every* racial, ethnic, and economic grouping does not live up to that of their peers across the nation. These systemic failings diminish their futures and the future of California and limit from the start the hopes, dreams, and values of the young people who should be able to expect more of the adults in charge. Do not blame the children. It is the adults who have failed to provide the high expectations and necessary support.

In *Serrano v. Priest*, the California Supreme Court ruled that the state has the constitutional obligation to ensure that the “abundant gifts of learning” are available to all students on equal terms. It stated: “Education is essential to preserving an

individual's opportunity to compete successfully in the economic marketplace, despite a disadvantaged background. Accordingly, the public schools of this state are the bright hope for entry of the poor and oppressed into the mainstream of American society." Subsequent cases echoed numerous other rulings, including the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case, that providing quality education to all is essentially a state function. The responsibility ultimately rests with the state, not local authorities. In *Butt v. State of California*, the California Supreme Court further explained that "the California Constitution makes public education uniquely a fundamental concern of the State and prohibits maintenance of the common public school system in a way which denies basic educational equality to the students of particular districts."

Finally, for members of the Committee, more important than either the constitutional guarantee or the economic necessity is the moral obligation to offer each and every California schoolchild equal opportunity for an excellent education. It is simply not fair that some students, year after year, generation after generation, are asked to learn in buildings that deserve to be demolished. It is simply not fair that some students, year after year, generation after generation, are assigned to the least-qualified teachers. It is simply not fair that some students, year after year, generation after generation, have state-of-the-art labs and performing arts centers while others do not even have the most basic textbooks.

In a state that routinely professes its commitment to equal opportunity for all, it is simply not fair that some students, year after year, generation after generation, are handicapped by the low expectations of the adults charged with educating them. This "soft bigotry of low expectations" is especially offensive when the research shows incontrovertibly that, when given the same opportunities as their more privileged peers, disadvantaged students also succeed.

And it is simply not right that, year after year, generation after generation, leaders readily acknowledge these harsh inequalities but do too little to end them. Moving forward on the proposals in this report will go at least part way toward closing these opportunity and performance gaps. In the process, it will make our system fairer, our citizens better prepared, our state stronger, and our democracy more viable. It's time.