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California State Senate

SENATOR
DARRELL STEINBERG
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE
SIXTH SENATE DISTRICT

STANDING COMMITTEES:
SENATE RULES
CHAIR
APPROPRIATIONS
PUBLIC SAFETY

December 6, 2011

The Honorable Edmund G. Brown Jr.
Governor of California
State Capitol Building
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Governor Brown –

Nearly two months have passed since your October 8 veto of Senate Bill 547. I have reflected on your veto message, and I intend to continue my efforts to improve California's public school accountability system (the Academic Performance Index or API). I want to make the following suggestions following suggestions for next steps to make California's accountability system more relevant to the 21st century economy:

1. If you are not comfortable specifying additional indicators, such as college and career preparedness, for inclusion in the index, there are interim steps that could be taken now to make the API a more rational tool. Your State Board of Education has the administrative authority to temper the API's overreliance on standardized test scores (now the sole measure of school performance) by limiting those scores to no more than 60 percent of the index. I suggest, as a starting point, using graduation rates to make up the 40 percent balance for middle and high schools and for districts serving those schools. Already required by law to be included in the API but never implemented, graduation rates are a critical indicator of student engagement and curricular relevance. These two factors are ignored – I would argue undercut -- by the existing accountability system.

2. Following up on our conversations about SB 547, I will continue to communicate my sense of urgency about the need to more closely align high school curriculum to the needs of the economy we hope to rebuild in California. This concern was what inspired my effort to include measures of college preparation and career readiness in the accountability system for high schools. I would ask that you remain open to exploring the state's role, whether through the API or some other mechanism, in encouraging rigorous curriculum across an array of career sectors. High schools must do more to help students

draw the connection between what they are learning in class and what they aspire to do after graduation, whether that's community college, apprenticeship, four-year college, or straight to the world of work. Our unacceptable drop-out rate is the leading indicator of our struggle in this area.

3. Recent research from the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning underscores the need to re-invigorate science instruction at the elementary level. Within the 60 percent of the API reserved for standardized test scores, let's explore the possibility of increasing the emphasis given to student results in science, as well as history, which are both now undervalued in the index.

4. There is widespread agreement that it is time to move away from the existing API decile system (ranking schools relative to one another from 1 to 10) and toward a scoring system pegged to an absolute standard, in order to create a more accurate representation of school performance.

5. Your veto message suggested "locally convened panels to visit schools, observe teachers, interview students, and examine student work." Given the state's fiscal straits, my impression is you are not interested in creating a costly new statewide program. But we could explore whether a voluntary pilot program, supported by federal school improvement funds, is worth pursuing.

I am eager to discuss these suggestions with you, and to hear about any other elements you would like to add to the discussion.

The window for bill introduction opens January 4, and I would like us to begin our work together before the end of the year. I look forward to our collaboration in this critical policy area, with so much potential to improve education for the six million children in California public schools.

Sincerely,

DARRELL STEINBERG
President pro Tempore, 6th District

Cc: Mike Kirst, President, State Board of Education
Sue Burr, Executive Director, State Board of Education

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