

DISCUSSION POINTS KEYED TO CONSENSUS QUESTIONS

The goal of the consensus meeting(s) is to come to agreement on your League's answers to the consensus questions. The following discussion questions have been compiled to help focus your discussion. They are presented in a format parallel to the consensus questions for convenience of reference. These comments and questions will enable you to jump-start a discussion that has lagged, veered off topic or failed to start. This is not a script that must be followed, but ideas and aids to help you cover the material in the limited amount of time.

Please note that the Consensus Report Form (see pages 25-37) has also been designed to help focus your discussions. Please review both and keep them with you as you guide your members through the questions.

1. EQUITABLE ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION

What is the obligation of the state? How can we know that the state is meeting its constitutional obligation for **all** students no matter where they live or what their plans are for life after high school graduation? Does this obligation extend beyond funding?

A. A "Yes" answer means the consensus of your group is that the state is currently meeting its constitutional obligation to provide equitable opportunities for teaching and learning in all schools and enables students to graduate with the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in either postsecondary education or the workforce or both.

A "No" answer leads to question B.

B. Based on many conversations across the state, we understand that many think the answer is "funding." Try to approach this question without preconceived answers and think beyond funding. Keep in mind that this is a statewide study. While it is natural to think of your local school community when discussing this series of questions, your answers should consider the bigger, statewide picture.

- What are other obstacles to having highly qualified teachers in every classroom?
- How could priorities be shifted?
- What are the basics that must be provided for every student to have an equitable opportunity to learn?

You may also want to look at the section of the Study Guide that addresses school district organization (page 43). Could smaller learning communities be one way to achieve this goal?

C. This question will probably take more time and provoke more questions in school communities that have been strongly impacted by charters. Review your local situation quickly as you introduce the question. If your school community was impacted by the recent closure of 60 charter schools across the state, try to have local information on how these children have been placed. This will prevent digressions and allow you to focus on the questions. Remember, many of the schools that have been closed opened before AB 1994 was passed in 2002. Many of the problems of oversight should not happen again. Focus on the future and a statewide position.

D. This is a very open ended question and an important one. Try to move beyond the obvious answer of improved funding.

- What can the state do to assist schools and districts in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers?
- Are there ways that more schools could be built or retrofitted more quickly and less expensively?
- Is there something that could be done at the state level about the growing cost of textbooks?
- Should school districts be exempt from paying sales tax on textbooks as one legislator has suggested?

Brainstorm with your local committee and discussion leaders before your consensus meetings for other ideas. Discuss the pros and cons of state responsibility and local control.

- What is the obligation of the state to monitor local schools and districts to insure they are properly providing for every child?
- Should state accountability monitoring go beyond test scores and include allocation of basic educational necessities such as textbooks and bathroom access?

E. This is basically two questions. The first is conceptual. Should California be moving toward universal access to voluntary preschool for all children?

If the answer is yes, the second question becomes: How should this be implemented?

- What percentage of students entering kindergarten ready to learn would indicate success in achieving this goal?
- Who should be first served?
- How can it be made attractive to families who traditionally have not placed their children in a preschool program?
- What services outside the traditional classroom should be included?
- What is the role of the parent during the years before preschool and during the preschool years?

While it is not a part of the consensus questions, an issue that may arise is the recommendation of the California Performance Review that a task force study prekindergarten through primary education as a continuum. If this does come up, just state that you and the study committee are aware of the recommendation but it is not a part of the question under discussion.

2. SCHOOL FINANCE

This will probably be the most difficult section to present. Review the materials in Packet #1 and Packet #2 along with the material in the Study Guide. The EdSource publication, *The Basics of California's School Finance System*, published in August 2003 and available online at www.EdSource.org, is a one-page, two-sided document that could be published in a VOTER before your consensus meetings or used as a handout.

Because these questions are complicated and often emotionally charged, we are recommending you reserve one-third to one-half of your time to discuss them.

A. Please note the key words in the basic question: sustainable, transparent, adequate and timely.

- (1) This question and the following one are both about categorical funding and can be discussed together as the answer to one will influence the other. You may also indicate programs that should remain independently funded, those that could be included in a block grant, and those that should be folded into the revenue limit. Please give your rationale.
- (2) If you have answered “yes” to the previous question, here is where you consider how to best allocate the funds to school districts/school sites. (2)a through (2)c of the consensus report form will step you through various options discussed in the Study Guide (page 29).

If your members believe other funding mechanisms should be considered to accomplish the same goals as described in questions A(1) and A(2), please describe them in the space allotted, or attach as a separate page.

- (3) Again, remember that this is a statewide study. In some areas of the state the county office of education has much more responsibility than in others. Try not to get bogged down on this question; just get a reading of your members’ thinking. You could spend an entire meeting discussing the balance of powers between a district office and individual schools or between principals and site governance committees.
- (4) This question is very likely to invoke passionate responses in both directions. First responses will probably depend on how successful your local school community has been with independent fund raising and with passing parcel taxes, but try to move the discussion forward to the big, statewide position.
 - Should it be possible to pass a parcel tax with a 55 percent majority as it now is with school bonds?
 - What other kinds of state action are needed to make it possible for schools to seek new revenue locally? (Constitutional amendment?)
 - How can the state law balance the desires of a local community to raise funds for their local schools with the desire for equitable funding across the state?
 - Should the state provide additional funds to poorer districts that cannot successfully raise funds locally?

3. GOVERNANCE

A large part of the California Master Plan for Education is devoted to issues related to school governance. They are more likely to be “lively issues” in Sacramento than in most local school communities. However, they are important and need to be carefully discussed.

Major questions regarding kindergarten through university governance center on the linkage between who make the decisions and how they can be held accountable; the linkage between the rules and the funding (what happens if the legislature passes a new mandate and the governor vetoes some or all of the funding?); and how the checks and balances are played out. At the state level, one proposal is to give more power to the secretary for education, who is appointed by the governor, and make the superintendent of public instruction (SPI) only responsible for implementation and holding local schools and districts accountable. A very different proposal is to pass more authority down to local school sites and, as long as they meet state standards and improve performance, let them implement as they wish. Another is to maintain the status quo. The questions are simple, the answers are not.

- A This is the big question—aligning authority with accountability. The legislature currently can pass laws regarding school practices from testing to curriculum to class size. It is the responsibility of the superintendent of public instruction to implement these laws, yet the ultimate authority over the budget is with the governor. Who is held accountable? Who holds them accountable? Use the charts showing the state governance structure on page 7 if you find them useful. (For more information see pages 1-19.)

Another way to address this question is: Are we all accountable because of the decisions we make at the polls about ballot measures, about who gets elected and what educational positions they espouse? Something to think about if the discussion is not moving forward, but be sure to answer the question from a state governance viewpoint.

- B. This is a continuation of the last question. The two can be addressed at the same time.
- C. Should more power be centralized in the executive branch to improve accountability (the governance and the funding come from the same branch of government) or are the checks and balances of having an independent, elected superintendent of public instruction more important? Consider the previous questions about tying accountability and funding to governing authority. Discuss the pros and cons of Unity vs. Balance. (See pages 3, 16-19.)
- D. Many people and organizations propose giving local school districts and/or local schools more decision-making authority, as long as the schools meet state standards and are improving student performance.

Background information on this question can be found in the governance section in the memo on Legal Constraints on Local Control on pages 31-33, and in the third part of the finance section, particularly the recommendations of Dr. William Ouchi in *Making Schools Work*. Again, you may want to look at the pros and cons of each side.

- E. A question to consider is whether the current diffusion of power is sending a mixed message to local school districts and sites. Do local school sites and school boards get different messages from the different governing authorities? Is this a problem? Should there be a concentration of power or do lines of authority need to be more clearly addressed in the various agencies. The big question is how to achieve accountability in authority, responsibility, and power by achieving both balance and unity in decision making.

4. ACCOUNTABILITY AND ASSESSMENT

To answer questions before they are asked, you might want to have the most recent test data from your local district(s). This is available from your district office, is frequently printed in local papers, and is available at the Department of Education Web site at www.cde.ca.gov. Again this is just to save time and keep the meeting moving. Answers to the consensus question should look at the big picture, statewide effects.

- A. We recommend answering questions three and four first. Briefly exploring the positive and negative effects of student assessment first can lead to a more balanced discussion. (See pages 76-79)

- B. The operative word here is ALL students. Some say that before the current assessment and accountability system was implemented in California, underperforming schools, with primarily students of color, were overlooked. The new, more detailed system, with the addition of the even more detailed federal No Child Left Behind Act, has produced hard data that cannot be ignored. It has brought the attention of legislators, academics, and others to underperforming schools and students in an unprecedented way.
- Has this increased attention resulted in improved student achievement?
- C. Review the Key Questions on pages 77-79 of the Accountability and Assessment section of the study guide. How can we assess these noncognitive skills? Should they be considered?
- D. What motivates educators to improve academic outcomes?
- Are rewards and sanctions needed?
 - Does being recognized for improved performance motivate educators to work harder?
 - Is the fear of sanctions a positive motivator or is it counter productive?
 - Should we encourage the state to go back to financial rewards for schools that meet their goals?
- E. This question is also addressed under question one and in the discussion of the *Williams* case on pages 77-78. Questions E and F can be considered together.
- F. A continuation of the previous question, this question adds assistance and time to the resources.
- How much time should be allowed?
 - Children are continuing to progress through the schools as they strive to improve. Is this fair to those students?
 - What assistance is provided and is this enough?
- G. How important is it that performance data be presented in a way that is understandable and usable? State testing is late in the school year and results are announced just as the new school year is starting in the fall. Students have moved on to different classes and often different schools. Are there ways teachers, schools, and districts can use this data effectively? Do districts and site administrators have effective ways of interpreting this data for teachers, schools, and district use?
- H. This is a follow-up to the previous question and the two can be addressed at the same time. The goals of collecting and interpreting this data include not only the ability to determine student progress and how students perform relative to each other, but also the ability to use the data to identify areas of individual weaknesses and strengths—to help teachers and parents know how to support student learning/student success. Is this goal being met?
- I. 4-I is basically a governance question.
- How much real decision-making power or authority do local districts and school sites have to improve student achievement?
 - If **responsibilities** are designated to local districts and school sites, what real decision-making **authority** should also be delegated?
 - Should a local site administrator be able to choose a counselor rather than a music teacher if that is something that they think would improve student achievement, even if their choice is different from staffing formulas set by the district office?
 - Taking into account current restraints, where should the accountability lie?

- J. Policy-makers is a broad statement. Please look at this question from the state level, not local district policy makers.

5. THE PUBLIC’S ROLE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

This is a broad, open-ended question, but please try to make time for it. Look at it in League terms as “directions to the board” at the end of our conventions and annual meetings. Over the past years the League has been a part of a wide coalition of people striving to improve public education from being a part of the founding of EdSource over 25 years ago to the new working relationships that are growing out of our funding from the Hewlett Foundation. How can we most effectively continue and grow in that role? How can we encourage others to take an active role?