

Comments by David B. Cohen for the Equity and Excellence Commission

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I very much appreciate the invitation to speak to you this afternoon. Thank you to the Department of Education and the Commission members, Representative Mike Honda, Albert Beltran Jr. from the Congressman's staff, and all who helped bring this event to San Jose. My name is David B. Cohen, and I am a National Board Certified English teacher, completing my ninth year at Palo Alto High School, and my seventeenth year of teaching overall. I also help to direct a network called Accomplished California Teachers, based at Stanford University and dedicated to the promotion of teacher voice in education policy. My remarks today, however, represent my own opinions.

Later this evening you will hear from my colleague, Martha Infante, a distinguished social studies teacher from Los Angeles. Our hope is that if you consider our remarks in tandem, they will illuminate some clear inequities in California public schools, and suggest some solutions.

We do not come here with unrealistic expectations that all of the inequities our students experience can be addressed through a commission, or even necessarily through education reform efforts. I come from a district where the mean family income is over \$140,000 and where more than 75% of the adults have four or more years of college education. Students in my district generally have access to economic resources and other opportunities that give them significant advantages in education and in life.

But which inequities experienced by children *can* be addressed in the arena of public education? Certainly not those of parental education, family wealth, or access to health care.

But we can, and we must, aim for equity in *our effort*, equity in *civic commitment* to meet the needs of every student. We *can* ask communities, policy makers, and voters to show an equitable *determination* to provide excellence in education.

When I look at quality education, in any setting, I consistently see four elements in place: *expectations, relationships, access, and support*. I'd like to describe what those elements look like in practical terms for my school, and ask you to consider how we might promote equity in those areas.

When I say *expectations*, I mean both the explicit and implicit assumptions about *education* - not just students. In Palo Alto, we have a community *expectation* about investment in educational excellence. We consistently vote for local property taxes and bonds to support our schools. Our district's educational foundation also kicked in an extra \$3.4 million this year.

That's over \$300 per student, reflecting our community's *expectations* that music, art, science, enrichment activities, instructional aides and extra counseling are essential parts of an excellent education.

Excellent education is also a result of solid *relationships* in a school, where *everyone* works together effectively. We achieve that largely by hiring and retaining a strong staff. Our district attracts a broad applicant pool by offering an environment in which people want to work, and where teachers also earn 15-20% more than we would in many nearby districts. We often hire experienced teachers away from those other districts, and we haven't endured any layoffs in these troubled years. It's clearly inequitable that we're building our stability off of the instability of other districts. To promote *relationships* in an *equitable* way, we have to reduce layoffs. Help schools to hire people they will want to keep, and then support schools becoming places where teachers *want* to stick around for a long time, where it's possible to forge bonds with students, parents, and the community.

At my school we also promote positive relationships through an innovative (and expensive) advisory program that matches students to faculty members at ratios of roughly 25:1 for freshmen and 70:1 other grades. I monitor the academic progress of 67 advisees, meeting with them in small groups or individually, providing guidance as needed, calling or emailing parents when necessary. Yet statewide, California has the worst student-to-counselor ratio in the nation, around 800:1.

My school also keeps most classes under 30 students, while I'm reading about high school classes surpassing 40 students elsewhere in California. Keep in mind that the effect of increased class sizes for high school *teachers* should typically be multiplied by five. Adding five students *per class* has the same impact as requiring us to take on one more class *section* worth of grading, meetings, and communications.

Regarding class size, I know there are studies, and members of this commission, skeptical about its importance. I'm skeptical about relying on studies that didn't examine class sizes this large, and studies that rely on test scores to analyze effects. Our state tests are the poorest measure we have of a small subset of the important outcomes in a classroom. If we equalize every other factor, virtually every parent would prefer to have their child in a class of 22 rather than 33, because we know how much depends on *relationships* between teachers and students, and among students. The *equitable* solution here is not complicated, but it requires honesty, and commitment to promoting better *relationships* in all schools.

The next essential element in a thriving learning environment is *access*. By access I mean ensuring that students have *a way in* to school success. While many secondary schools

are down to the bare minimum in course offerings, here's a sample of some of the diverse course offerings at my high school: five journalism courses produce a newspaper, two magazines, a news website and a daily television broadcast. In science: biotechnology, geology, astronomy, and marine biology. In the arts: multiple choirs, multiple orchestras, multiple ceramics courses, intro and advanced courses in photography and videography. In career and technical education: computer programming, video game design, and robotics.

Another key point of access for students is a high quality school library, but shockingly, we have many schools without librarians. Where I teach, we have two full-time staff members in the library, plus volunteers. Our librarian is the most important teacher on campus; she's an instructor to *every* student, *and* an invaluable resource for the entire staff.

Access leads to inspiration, and it depends not only on what we teach, but how it's taught. I've never met a high school student who loved a language arts textbook. They are not impressed by standards-based pablum, nor are they drawn in by glossy images of predictably multi-cultural teens, artificially posed in stereotypical scenes. They are not interested in answering generic personal questions posed by anonymous textbook creators. *But* my students can tell you what literature they love, which memoirs motivated them, which novels inspired them, which articles opened their eyes to the world. My sophomores find and even help create access when they lead a community discussion based on a Holocaust memoir. They give up hours of their time on a school night to impart their own wisdom, serving for one night as teachers to their own teachers, to their parents and neighbors. They will read, write, speak, and listen - practicing every portion of the state's English Language Arts standards, but they *forget to ask if they're being graded on this work* - at least until it's done.

That's what access looks like. Students want to *get in* to the curriculum; equity demands we give them a curriculum worth getting in to. Why is that some students deserve access to authentic learning, while others get the message that their test scores matter more than their minds and their spirits? *Equity* demands respect for all learners, providing them with access to real knowledge and meaningful practice.

The last element is support. Let's start with financial support. Our district's general expenditures per pupil this year stand at \$11,431 per student - 87% more than San Francisco Unified, 103% more than Oakland Unified. This despite the fact that *their* students, on average, need and deserve *more* support than students in Palo Alto. There is some government assistance for school turnarounds, but it dictates punitive actions - as if the persistent failure of a school had little to do with persistent poverty, and persistent anemia in school funding. Equity, partnered with some compassion and common sense, might involve government support

unencumbered by restrictive mandates that disempower all of the stakeholders at the local level.

But support is more than money. In my school, we have volunteers putting in enough hours to represent seven or eight full-time support staff. They're tutoring students, and freeing up other staff members' to do our best work for students. We also have more classified staff than most districts, and expanding rather than contracting professional development opportunities. There is no *equity* in this picture, when educational excellence is actively *supported* for a few, and an expendable luxury for most.

I don't imagine for a moment that there is anything easy in the quest for education equity, but it is imperative to the health of a democratic society. Tomorrow morning in room 201 at Palo Alto High School, my sophomores will be pondering this quotation from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Atticus Finch tells his children to confront inequity even though it doesn't seem to hurt them directly. He warns, "Don't fool yourselves - it's all adding up and one of these days we're going to pay the bill for it. I hope it's not in you children's time." I invite you all to ponder that quotation as well; ask what price we already pay for inequity, what excellence we have forsaken. Consider how much steeper the price may be if we don't heed the call of equity - to build up expectations, relationships, access and support for *all* students. Thank you for your time.