

Education Policy: Q&A with CA Senator Jack Scott

Contributed by PT Editors
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EDUCATION

POLICY: Equality,
Knowledge, and
Federalism

“Education is the future,” says CA State Senator Jack Scott, who chairs the State's Senate Committee on Education. Everyone agrees “that all Americans deserve a quality education,” but most political leaders launch into the “how” before answering the “what” in defining education policy. The 2008 Presidential candidates' position statements, for example, have focused on who sets educational goals and standards: parents or government? (Teachers, students anyone?) Who pays? And, for what? And, where do the federal, state and local governments fit into the equation?

But their proposals beg the question of core principles — ultimate objectives — of what the country's education policy is seeking to achieve. To gain some perspective, PT spoke with Senator Scott, who brings 16 years as a teacher and 18 years as a College president

to the legislature.
He was elected
to the CA State
Assembly in
1996 and the
CA Senate in
2000.

Equality

PT: What
should be the
basic goal of
our education
policy?

Senator

Scott: I
go back to
our founding
principles,
that "all
men are created
equal." Students
come to school
with inequalities,
so what we
really mean
by that is "all
people are
entitled to
equal opportunity." One
of the most
effective
ways to reach
that goal
is through
education.

PT: How
does this translate
into specific
programs?

Senator

Scott: What
this means
are financial
aid programs,
compensatory
programs including
special education
for students
who have learning
disabilities
and school
lunches. We've
also learned
that it's
more difficult
to teach students

who don't
speak English
as a native
language.

PT: Is
there a key
to getting this
done?

Senator

Scott: All
of this requires
good teachers
and good facilities.
We can't
control socioeconomic
factors, but
we can look
to equality
of teaching.
Any steps
towards good
pay, good
working conditions,
and elevating
the status
of teaching
profession
are in the
right direction.
I also believe
there should
be differential
pay for teachers.

Knowledge

PT: Let's
talk about test
scores vs. creative
thinking. NCLB,
the College
Boards, and
school curriculums
are all oriented
towards test
taking. In a
previous article,
a number of
educators told
PT that, "creative
thinking" had
suffered in
the process.

Senator

Scott: There
has to be
a balance.
No test is
perfect, but

there is a value in testing. But, we have to be careful that in our headlong rush to more testing, real learning doesn't suffer. We've gone a little too test happy and have taken away instruction time. What students should gain is the means by which to gain more knowledge.

PT: In

a recently published book, author Susan Jacoby talks about the long history of "hostility to knowledge" in American culture. But, she says there's now been a new development: "not only are citizens ignorant about essential scientific, civic and cultural knowledge, but they also don't think it matters." In part, she lays the blame on a failing educational system. "Although people are going to school more and more years, there's no evidence that they know more," she said. Senator Scott: There is a need to create a national culture that says you should get as much education as possible. Education is the future. Our greatest resource is

our human resources—the
intellectual
capital. I've
been very impressed
by Asian cultures.
There's
an emphasis
on learning,
a culture that
prizes education.
Federalism

PT: That
brings up the
subject of NCLB
("No
Child Left Behind").

Senator

Scott: I
haven't
faulted NCLB
on the basis
of testing,
but on an
unrealistic
goal that "all
kids will
be proficient." There's
no way that
a school in
an inner city
can match
the test results
of an affluent
suburb. A
state with
a homogenous
population
will have
an easier
time meeting
certain standards
than one with
a very heterogeneous
population.

There are so
many variables
that impact
education. Testing
students for
proficiency
may not provide
all the right
answers, but
there are ways
to measure whether
students are
making an improvement.

I have also criticized NCLB because it was insufficiently funded. Obviously, we have not emphasized education as much as we should. Improving the quality of teachers and insuring that classes are well equipped with the latest technology are crucial to improving standards, but NCLB never took those costs into account.

PT: So, what are the respective roles of Washington and the state governments?

Senator

Scott: I became involved in education in the 1950s—when we decided that separate is not equal. The Federal government could well serve a purpose by rearranging its priorities, providing some broad guidelines, and better funding certain programs, e.g., special education.

If you talk to people, they're not anti-education. They are looking for guidelines, special funding that would empower them to improve our educational system.

PT: What
about the states,
California in
particular?

Senator

Scott: The
state has
primary responsibility
for education,
for providing
quality K-12
and higher
education.
Money isn't
the only thing,
but CA ought
to be spending
more money.
Education
is the No.
1 responsibility
for the state.
It's
the largest
item in the
state budget.

As a state

we have to say
this is high
priority. It
has to do with
the success
of our state.
In CA, there's
a study that
says by 2020,
we will need
40% of our population
with a college
degree. But
projections
say only 33%
of the population
will have a
Bachelor's
Degree.

We ought to
be willing to
raise taxes
to pay for education.
Otherwise, we
will pay in
other ways—more
prisons, higher
unemployment.
We have a choice
of being a high

tax, high service
state. Or low
tax, low service
state. We can't
have it both
ways. To raise
taxes, we have
to get a 2/3
vote of the
Legislature.
We could reform
our property
tax, as long
as it made sense.

PT: Thank
you for your
time Senator.