

# 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.