

## Education Listening Tour Report

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### **I. Executive Summary:**

Ensuring that every student benefits from a high-quality, accessible, and affordable education is one of the core values of this country. I have spent my public career as a City Councilmember, Mayor, County Supervisor, California State Assemblyman, California State Senator, and now Member of Congress fighting for these values, from early childhood up to and including higher education. As a newly elected Member of Congress, I set out to hear what the educational community in California's 11th Congressional District (comprised of the majority of Contra Costa County) believed high-quality, equitable education should look like. Over the last two years, I have connected with students and educators in every school district in our community on an **Education Listening Tour (ELT)**. Schools ranging from elementary to higher education were visited, while I gathered stories of student success and interacted with skilled educators as they inspired young minds. Ranging from Contra Costa College in the West, to Pittsburg High School and Los Medanos Community College in the East, to Stanley Middle School and California State University East Bay (Cal State East Bay) in the center, eighteen schools were visited in all. I discussed the ELT with former Chairman of the Education and Workforce Committee John Kline, and plan to share our results with the Education & Workforce Committee, staff and new Chairwoman Virginia Foxx (R-NC) and Ranking Member Bobby Scott (D-VA).

With this report, we hope to accomplish the following goals: (1) highlight the successes unfolding in our educational community, (2) highlight the federal legislation that we support based upon our community's successes, (3) identify the supports needed to further improve educational outcomes for students of all ages, backgrounds, races, genders, and socioeconomic statuses, and (4) establish a legislative plan of action based on ensuring students are prepared for success in their jobs, in their communities, and in their lives.

The Republican-controlled 115<sup>th</sup> Congress, coupled with the agenda of the President, represents one of the most uncertain and potentially damaging environments for public education we have seen since the creation of the Department of Education. In order to protect the educational progress that we have made in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we will have to defend public school funding while simultaneously ensuring that all schools (public, charter, and private) are held accountable for protecting the rights and freedoms of all students in attaining a high quality education.

## II. A Vision is Born

For the first 200 years of our nation's history, America's education requirements were largely static. The vast majority of Americans required limited schooling in order to be successful in their chosen careers (initially dominated by farming then transitioning to manufacturing jobs in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) beyond the culturally preserved knowledge that they learned through interaction with their family and community. These communities were isolated in a way that the current internet-connected, smart phone wielding generation would find hard to imagine, leading to ideas spreading at a slow rate and stagnant perspectives. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this changed. Manufacturers, seeking increased profit margins and less-regulated work environments, started to outsource their factories to other countries. The benefits of a college degree grew (along with the cost) as the blue-collar workforce was cannibalized by outsourcing. As the information sector of our economy grew, our country began its transition towards white-collar job predominance. The American labor force began to shift away from low-skill, high repetition jobs requiring minimal education and training. Culturally, the civil and women's rights movements required Americans of all races, cultures, backgrounds and socioeconomic classes to envision what a society would look like that was not totally dominated by a white, male hegemony. Women quickly made their way into the workforce, as World War II had created a demand for them, aided by the astonishing rate at which fixed costs of life in America were rising. Our country required an education revolution capable of preparing young people to handle these new realities. For a variety of factors, that revolution (though clearly laid out by researchers and experts of the day) did not occur at any substantial level until recently.

Today, society is evolving at an even faster rate than it did last century. Automation is providing a route to reshoring much of our manufacturing business, but simultaneously incentivizing employers to hire fewer workers. Opinion news, fact-less reporting, and social media has exacerbated the strong partisanship that has taken over our political system. Despite all of these challenges, we are finally seeing evidence that school systems across the country are reacting to the educational demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by shifting away from the antiquated techniques of the past (though pockets of California have been following this trend for many years). They are beginning to embrace the progressive policies that nations around the world have used to catch up to and surpass the performance of American students, promoting independent thinking over memorization, problem solving over repetition, and leading rather than following. This progress is steady and, with enough momentum, could spread deeply and widely across the country, provided students are given the appropriate supports.

With the passage of bipartisan legislation in 2015 (The Every Student Succeeds Act or ESSA), states acquired the tools they needed to adapt their education systems to our 21<sup>st</sup> century society while continuing to ensure the needs of those who have been thus far underserved finally get the support to succeed. This built on the work done in 1965, under President Lyndon Baines Johnson, when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was created. President Johnson's beliefs that "full educational opportunity" should be "our first national goal," helped lead to this groundbreaking legislation that established equal education as a civil right. Since that time, Congress has often worked in a bipartisan manner to update the law to keep pace with changes in our nation and advances in education research.

One such update in 2002, known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), held states accountable for student progress and strongly emphasized standardized test results focused on student performance in math and language arts. While Congress's intentions were commendable, problems soon arose ranging from allegations of letting standardized tests guide curriculum decisions, to the testing being too high-stakes, leading to unrealistic expectations for schools of all types. ESSA returned more control to states in determining how they will assess the efficacy of their schools, while placing few restrictions on the standardized assessment of their students.

Throughout this back-and-forth, however, the United States has fallen further and further down the list of world leaders in education (though it should be noted that recently, the U.S. has made great strides in decreasing the performance gap of our disadvantaged students, when compared to other nations).

While Congress works to achieve the appropriate balance between state-based systems of equity and federal mandates to promote educational excellence, communities across the country continue to seek out powerful learning experiences for their students, supporting their success in and after leaving the classroom. Many of these communities have forged a pathway forward by identifying what would benefit student learning the most (with California often leading the way). It was this vision that we sought to unearth when we began our ELT. We wanted to understand what educators believed through experience, research, and schooling would most benefit students. We also hoped to continue former Congressman George Miller's legacy of ensuring that educational progress is informed first and foremost by educators and students.

The first phase of our ELT spanned from April 2015 through October 2016. We visited every college and university campus in District CA-11, along with every K-12 school district:

1. *Monte Vista High School, February 17, 2015*
2. *Mt. Diablo High School, February 18, 2015*
3. *Diablo Valley College, February 19, 2015*
4. *De Anza High School, March 9, 2015*
5. *Antioch High School, April 17, 2015*
6. *Contra Costa College, May 6, 2015*
7. *Miramonte High School, April 20, 2015*
8. *Donald Rheem Elementary School, May 27, 2015*
9. *Opportunity Junction, June 19, 2015*
10. *Pittsburg High School, October 27, 2015*
11. *Los Medanos Community College, March 9, 2016*
12. *Canyon Elementary School, May 3, 2016*
13. *Stanley Middle School, October 4, 2016*
14. *Orinda Intermediate, October 4, 2016*
15. *Buena Vista Elementary School, October 5, 2016*
16. *St. Mary's College, October 11, 2016*
17. *Cal State East Bay, Concord Campus, October 11, 2016*
18. *John Swett Elementary School, October 12, 2016*

Our visits were organized by the schools and included conversations between students, teachers, parents, aids, staff members, administrators, and school board members. We had the opportunity to interact with teachers and students in active classrooms, tour their campuses, participate in roundtable discussions, and take questions from students and staff in a public forum.

Despite small differences between each school's successes and challenges, themes arose in conversations and feedback that we had/received. What follows is a description of those shared aims and opportunities related to enhancing all students' ability to pursue personal, interpersonal, and professional success.

### III. Born from the Vision

This section details the practices that schools in our community found to be consistently associated with student achievement as well as the suggestions our community has made for improvement. Both the successful practices and suggestions for future improvement are complemented by research demonstrating their proven effectiveness.

#### K-12:

#### **Reaffirm the importance of all subjects, not just tested subjects**

During the NCLB era, many schools focused their resources on improving test scores in Math and Language Arts. This led to a decline in funding for subjects that did not have high-stakes tests attached to them. Combined with the heavy funding cuts of the Great Recession, physical education classes, art, dance and music programs, academic teams, science classes, extracurricular activities, clubs of all sorts, and other programs saw a drastic decline in funding and availability to students. Despite the economy improving over the last eight years, many state budgets still have not returned to pre-recession funding levels and therefore many of the cut programs have not been restored. In addition to artificially deflating the importance of “superlative” programs, the teach-to-the-test approach did not meaningfully improving test scores (either in-country standardized or on the world-wide issued TIMMS or PISA tests). Clearly, the country required a new direction.

It is our hope that ESSA can provide that direction. Today, schools in our District are restoring students’ access to subjects broader than the simple Math, Language Arts, Social Studies and Science pathways that defined most education systems in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Research clearly demonstrates that many of the same programs cut in austere budget times have strong positive impacts on students’ educational outcomes. Now, we have the opportunity to restore these programs, just like John Swett Elementary has been doing since it lost much of its programming in 2008. With the help of its PTA and the surrounding community, the school has been successful in restoring access to some of these programs for their elementary students. “Class sizes are still too big, but at least the kids have access to music, physical education, and science again,” said one PTA representative.

This well-rounded education that stakeholders consistently praised on the ELT also has the benefit of providing students with a wide range of skills from their work in those classes. While our educational system has its roots in fact memorization, research is consistently finding that this way of educating is not adequate to prepare students to be successful in today’s complex job market. Instead of trying to force students to remember everything they need to “learn,” contemporary research is finding it more productive for teachers to engage students in tasks requiring communication, collaboration, creativity, and higher-order thinking skills.

While these skills can be taught in core classes, “elective” classes, including those that did not exist 30 years ago (such as engineering, computer technology, coding and environmental science), provide additional opportunities to hone these skills. In a world that requires an understanding of the connections across industries, research indicates that students benefit from exploring the intersections of subjects in their school environment.

Additionally, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Centers and afterschool programs provide students with the opportunity to pursue topics not normally covered in the school day or go even deeper into the subjects they find most interesting. This has the added benefit of greatly reducing the potential for students to get into trouble outside of the school day. These supports are especially effective for students in underserved communities.

It should be noted that schools that serve low-income communities consistently have the most limited class availability and the fewest high-quality instructors available for students. Special Education students and

students of color have also been shown to have less opportunity to experience these benefits. Therefore, it is imperative that California and the nation continue to provide additional support and funding for these populations to ensure that they have an equal chance to be successful.

### **Provide Special Education programs the resources necessary to support students**

Despite the adversity created by having limited resources, the schools in our community have managed to create positive outcomes for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Throughout our visits, we consistently saw students with IEPs mainstreamed with their peers in general education classrooms, receiving the appropriate supports needed to be successful. We even saw these students being given leadership roles in their classrooms. This type of inclusion has been shown to not only improve self-confidence, enjoyment, and motivation in students being provided special education (SPED) services, but has shown parallel improvements with their Regular Education peers.

Despite the encouraging work done in our schools with exceptional learners, nearly every K-12 school we spoke with communicated the need to have increased funding for this population. In fact, studies shows that twice as much money is required to ensure that students being supported by special education services receive an “adequate” education. In fact, the Supreme Court recently ruled that “adequate” is no longer enough. School districts will now be expected to provide more time for services, specially designed instruction, and resources without an increase in their special education funding.

Congress set the maximum federal contribution for special education at 40% of the average per pupil expenditure when it passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975. In over 30 years, the federal government has never once funded IDEA at this maximum. In fact, in the year 2014, Congress appropriated only 16 percent, indicating a decrease for the third year in a row. Local and state educational agencies are being asked to cover the vast majority of the costs required to serve students with IEPs, despite federal mandates for supports and accountability. The feedback most frequently offered, across all topics and age groups, was to increase federal support for special education programs.

Further exacerbating these challenges is the increase in the number of students that fall on the upper end of the autism spectrum as a proportion of the entire student population (one survey estimates a 165% increase in the number of such students since 2005). Diane Gibson-Gray, an Antioch School District Board Member has noticed the increase of students with autism in Contra Costa County. “Schools don't receive adequate state and federal funding to pay for special education today,” she says. Principal Amy Espinoza from Buena Vista Elementary relates this underfunding to the huge workloads that SPED teachers face and why those positions are the single hardest position to fill in her school.

Fully funding special education would allow our districts to add on to their already excellent programs and would decrease their need to redirect funds from other areas to cover the cost of special education. We need to work to attract more SPED teachers to the field in order to meet the soaring demand. Finally, we need to harness the progress made in our schools and keep innovating the instruction and supports that special education students are receiving to ensure that we continue to shrink the achievement gap that exists between special education students and regular education students.

## **Encourage teacher retention and recruitment**

"When teachers hardly make a living wage, how can one expect them to stay in the profession, especially with California's cost of living challenges?" says Superintendent Sakata about teachers across Contra Costa County and California. With a 40-50 percent turnover rate for new teachers in their first five years of their career, Richard Ingersoll, a University of Pennsylvania professor who studies teacher turnover and retention, says schools serving poverty-stricken populations or those with poorly-functioning behavioral management systems can have rates that are far greater than that. Ingersoll says that many factors contribute to this turnover rate, including teacher voice, behavior management, classroom autonomy, support mechanisms (especially for newer teachers) and, of course, salary.

While this turnover rate has been a huge cost for districts across the country (one report found those costs to be north of \$2.2 billion), the real cost is in the education the kids are receiving. Bob Wise, President of the Alliance for Excellent Education, finds that, "[t]he monetary cost of teacher attrition pales in comparison to the loss of human potential associated with hard-to-staff schools that disproportionately serve low-income students and students of color. In these schools, poor learning climates and low achievement often result in students—and teachers—leaving in droves."

A recent survey of 211 school districts in California showed that approximately 75 percent reported a shortage of qualified teachers for the 2016/17 school year and 80 percent say that the situation has worsened since the 2013/14 school year. This survey found that the most concerning shortages are in the Special Education, mathematics, and science teaching sectors, caused most notably by a shrinking supply of new teachers combined with older teachers retiring. As a consequence, districts have been forced to hire teachers with substandard credentials and long-term substitutes. It is important to note that these teacher shortages also create administrator shortages, as Superintendent Sakata noted during our ELT, since administration programs require participants to be teachers before becoming administrators. These shortages are most prevalent (similarly to the teacher shortages) in districts with low-income students and in rural areas.

Despite all of these challenges, and perhaps due in part to them, many in our education community have learned to operate as a cohesive unit. Time and again, we listened to faculty and administrators speak of one another with great respect and school board members and superintendents speak of great relationships with their entire district. In fact, despite obvious budgetary struggles during the past decade, CJ Camarack, Superintendent of the Martinez Unified School District, argued for the importance of increasing teacher salaries in the face of the teacher shortage crisis. Members of various faculty at all levels voiced similar strategies when asked how they were combatting these retention and recruitment challenges, including increasing collaboration amongst teachers, increasing mentorship for new teachers, offering teachers leadership roles, increasing compensation/benefits when possible (including housing opportunities), and incentivizing opportunities for professional development.

A report on Solving the Teacher Shortage released this year found that the strategies that schools in our district are pursuing could be successful. In addition to the factors mentioned above, the report also suggests creating loan forgiveness programs aimed at attracting new, high-quality teachers, strengthening hiring practices, creating local pathways into the profession, revising timelines for resignation and transfer, and investing in high quality administrative teams.

These high quality teachers and administrators are developed through effective educational programming when they are training to be teachers, a reflective practice focused on embracing a growth mindset, rich professional development opportunities throughout their career and collaborative learning experiences with their colleagues.

As these practices become more commonplace, the profession is elevated, as is the likelihood that teachers will stay in education and that we will attract new teachers to the occupation.

Finally, in the diverse state of California, there remains an interest in – and need for – increasing the number of teachers of color in our schools. Preliminary research findings suggest that students reap positive rewards from having teachers that look like them standing in front of their classrooms. Former Secretary of Education Dr. John King noted recently that only 18% of the teachers in this country are teachers of color, while the majority of our students are non-Caucasian. By recruiting teachers from other racial groups, we not only improve classrooms for the minorities those teachers represent, but we also expose the entire student population to a more diverse community, improving experiences, outcomes and perspectives for all students.

Though the challenges are significant and the teacher shortage is substantial, our community is clearly on a productive track in their pursuit of a sustainable teacher retention and recruitment plan. Using newly available research combined with the best practices already at work in our schools, they are on a path to success.

### **Maintain and extend effective and robust career and technical education programs**

In his 2015 book Rise of the Robots, Martin Ford references the staggering gap between worker productivity and worker compensation, which he attributes mainly to automation. The jobs of today and tomorrow are not the jobs of yesterday. The education to workforce pipeline is and should be increasingly geared towards teaching the skills necessary for success now and in the future. These 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills are driving an evolution of the educational structure in our schools, where it is becoming commonplace to pair traditional academic classroom activities with rich, hands-on learning experiences aimed at driving career-oriented exploration. Schools allow students to pursue these pathways (sometimes referred to as academies), by providing them with connections to the career of their choosing, occasionally with the promise of internships/apprenticeships and job placement in the future. California has invested \$2 billion in one of the pathways approaches (called Linked Learning), seeking to assist schools in establishing and expanding these programs.

The Linked Learning Program in California is changing the face of vocational training. All students in these programs have the opportunity to get technical experience, regardless of whether their next step out of high school is work or higher education. When we visited Mt. Diablo High School, we got to witness their remarkable International Hospitality and Tourism academy in action. Students are tasked with creating a Farm to Table Restaurant experience, beginning with learning how to grow healthy, organic food, transitioning to the exploration of cooking methods that turn that food into culinary masterpieces, and ending with studying the techniques necessary for the service of meals in a fine dining setting. At Pittsburgh High School, students were designing computer animations as a part of the school's Green Engineering Academy, while others were growing food in a garden program that hosted Michelle Obama on her American Garden Tour.

Additionally, these academies allow students to connect with their communities through authentic collaborative experiences. De Anza High School runs an Information Technology (IT) Academy, which focuses on teaching students the skills necessary to engage in IT careers and provides the community with IT services free of charge. Each week, students come in during non-school hours to assist community members with computer issues, ranging from hardware and software issues, to explaining user interfaces. At Antioch High School, students could begin pursuing a career in public service during their academy work, helping them connect with local institutions in the process. Students enrolled in the Leadership and Public Services Academy have the opportunity to collaborate in pursuing service projects based on their community's needs.

Allowing students to pursue academic pathways of interest to them is one powerful strategy supporting students in the transition from high school to college. It opens up opportunities for schools to work with local businesses, forming lasting partnerships for the student and the school community, while creating a school-to-work pipeline for the employers. It is instrumental in the push to close the skills gap in California. It may also be helpful in preparing underserved students for more successful college experiences. If these schools are successful in increasing college preparedness and success for their students, they can dramatically increase a student's chances of being happy and earning a high wage. With the support of the state, our schools are already changing the face of career and technical education in America today through the increased use of academies and other career pathway models to pursue projects relevant to students' tomorrow and their community's today.

### **Use supportive school discipline practices to create encouraging, accommodating, and effective learning spaces, while preventing students from leaving school**

Last year, the Department of Education and the Department of Justice unveiled a “collaborative project to support the use of school discipline practices that foster safe, supportive, and productive learning environments while keeping students in school” to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. This initiative, supported by a variety of research, is focused on transforming school climate and addressing implicit bias and disciplining disparities in early childhood settings. Its purpose is to help schools curb problematic behavior in students through providing supports that will allow those students to develop more healthy coping behaviors for their classmates, their teachers, and for themselves.

These practices are especially helpful for minority youth. Recently, research has surfaced regarding the troubling trend of disproportionate minority contact in our education system. This trend refers to the increased likelihood of students of color having contact with the juvenile justice system as compared to Caucasian youth. We had a number of teachers and principals mention this occurrence, detailing the ways in which they have rethought their disciplinary practices to ensure their schools don't institutionalize the norms that lead to this inequity in the first place.

The Obama Administration was abreast of this trend when it launched the “rethinking discipline” initiative. This initiative is in-line with the tactics that many of the schools from our community have adopted. The K-12 institutions that we visited (including Head Start programs) have consistently been altering the way that they deal with misbehaviors in their schools to better support students in learning more productive ways to behave. A number of our schools have been using a trauma-informed approach, which seeks to understand why a child misbehaves in order to address the root causes. Multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have been shown to be pervasive in one-half to two-thirds of all students, and research has consistently shown a correlation between these traumas and a student's behaviors inside and outside the classroom.

A supportive approach to discipline also helps students to build and maintain a growth mindset (defined by having an open mind about the world, believing intelligence is constantly changing and growing, and embracing optimism). Students with a growth mindset are much more likely to be motivated to learn, achieve, and grow than students with a more rigid, fixed mindset. Importantly, educators have the ability to change a student's mindset through a combination of instruction and life experiences. Punitive approaches to discipline may change behavior, but they don't alter the motivation behind the behavior and don't change coping mechanisms effectively in the long-term. Supportive disciplinary practices emphasize to students that they have a choice in changing their behaviors. We saw this approach in action at Stanley Middle School. They stress the importance of their “Challenge Success” program in getting buy-in from their students by allowing families to collaborate with teachers and administrators in defining what success means to them, using a community's connection as a resource in altering unhealthy behavior patterns and providing an emotional outlet. Other schools use family

engagement centers to drive this supportive disciplinary process by facilitating discussions between family members focused on the success of their student. When school communities and families share the same goals and support students in similar ways, students are far more likely to succeed.

Through supportive measures such as trauma-informed approaches to discipline and engendering a growth mindset in students, our district's schools are demonstrating that it is possible to remove students from a disciplinary cycle that often never lets them out. As a result, our students are more likely to become more motivated, achieve higher, and live happier lives than students in other systems.

### **Incorporate higher order thinking skills into all classes**

Higher order thinking skills are not specific to a single subject, but can play a role in every class that a student takes in their schooling career. As automation continues its low-skill-workforce-eating trajectory, the skills most needed to be employable are the abilities to make sense out of complex information and events, to think creatively to solve real-world problems, to work well with others, to engage effectively in cross-cultural contexts, and to manage many forms of media and quantitative data in sophisticated ways. Linda Darling Hammond, legendary Stanford Education professor adds, "...people who lack access to higher-level skills will increasingly find themselves unable to join the workforce and participate effectively in society."

So what can be done in the classroom to elicit these skills? John Star, an education Professor at Harvard University suggests that high school teachers, "should strive to ask better questions, wait longer for students to come up with answers, think about project-based problems that would challenge their students more, and be more reflective about their teaching practice." We saw many of these strategies in action when we visited Miramonte High School where they have a debate club that forces its students to use sound reasoning and critical thinking when arguing about a particular topic. This experience, along with others students receive at Miramonte, has helped its student body to achieve a 98% college attendance rate. Like many of the schools we visited, Buena Vista Elementary School is focused on ensuring that their graduates receive a "whole child" education. This type of education has a cognitive focus, but also ensures that students analyze their physical, emotional and social perspectives and identities. We saw this in action when a class we were visiting held a spontaneous debate relating to Presidential candidates. It was structured in a way that respected student opinions, while allowing for differing points of view. Stanley Middle School has instituted a block schedule to support their "whole child" approach. They believe this offers their students more frequent and deeper discussion about ideas rather than avoiding these discussions because of time constraints. They also avoided cutting programs as much as possible during the recession despite the funding hardships this caused. Orinda Intermediate School pursues a "whole child" approach using problem-based learning strategies. This approach, which uses the exploration of big questions to guide students through a project experience, leads to their students being very engaged, hands-on, and curious. One project had students designing, engineering, prototyping and 3-D printing cases for smartphones.

Now that ESSA has removed dubious high-stakes testing hurdles from schools (that lower the cognitive rigor and higher order thinking skills that participating schools taught), schools are free to once again pursue an educational experience that is driven by these skills. Karin Hess's Cognitive Rigor Matrix, combining Bloom's Taxonomy with Webb's Depth of Knowledge work, is one notable standout that we saw in use during the ELT. This tool reimagines assessment in a way that rewards teachers for focusing on higher order skills, which is the opposite of what multiple choice tests have done for years.

When this kind of programming combines the availability of opportunities for students to pursue their academic interests outside of the normal school day, alongside the high quality professional development that was

addressed in the teacher retention section of this report, schools have the opportunity to create systems of support requiring students to use the full array of their cognitive abilities both during and beyond the school day.

### **Higher Education:**

#### **Support all students in being able to afford a college education**

It is now common knowledge that the benefits of having a well-educated society far outweigh the challenges associated with facilitating it. Study after study have shown that individuals with college degrees out-earn those without, and play a huge role in intergenerational mobility.

Cal State East Bay students enjoy one of the lowest tuitions in the nation. Despite this, many of its students still struggle to afford their education because the cost-of-living in the Bay Area is among the highest in the nation. When we visited, one student shared that he had reached his limit in borrowing from the federal government; another student was faced with attending university at the same time as a parent and was impacted by the fact that the federal lending process has a family maximum borrowing statute; still others struggled to afford housing. The largest economic burden consistently falls on those from minority and low socioeconomic backgrounds.

The most consistent feedback that we received from students and faculty at higher education institutions during the ELT was regarding the affordability of college. Student debt is up over 500% in less than 20 years, and is on its way to reaching \$1.5 trillion. Some argue that student debt could be the next “bubble” in the economy that could lead to another recession. These should not be challenges our youth face in pursuing a college education today. All students should have the opportunity to pursue higher education and they should have access to federal money to help them pay for all of the costs associated with it.

The cost of educational materials are often a harder burden for students to bear than tuition, as it is challenging to find a flexible, well-paying job as a college student. The cost of text books has risen at over twice the rate of inflation over the last couple of years, and with new editions being required more and more frequently, students are often opting out of buying them in order to save some of the money they would otherwise have to borrow. Combined with the cost of living in California, these expenses have become just as burdensome as tuition itself.

Going forward, our community has the ability to prepare students and families to be knowledgeable about the terms of the loans, grants, and scholarships that they may be offered empowering them to make the decisions that best fit their circumstances. Schools will need to continue to engage with the local business community to create scholarships and courses of study aligned with the future workforce and help students in finding financing pathways that allow them to cover all the costs associated with going to college. The federal government must play a role in easing this burden for students (which affects all but the wealthiest families) through a combination of increasing its investment in prospective college students, decreasing the interest rate students are responsible for on their student loans, and increasing the ability of students to refinance their loans in circumstances of exceedingly high interest rates or unsustainable monthly payments.

#### **Increase access to college for all who are interested**

All students deserve a high-quality education. Currently, the Higher Education Act does not offer all students the opportunity to pursue a high-quality education after high school. While its supports are crucial for the vast majority of students going to college (over 80% of all students pursuing a 4-year degree use financial aid of some sort), it is still not doing enough to give every one of our youth the opportunity to pursue a higher education. Similar to funding for IDEA at the K-12 level, almost every school that we spoke with would benefit from increasing federal financial aid rewards for students in order to increase the proportion of high school graduating classes that can attend a higher education institution.

While funding is an essential part of the access conversation, there are a number of other actions that schools can take to make college more accessible to students with a high school degree. Contra Costa College offers a number of job-training programs, which helps students in acquiring skills that will immediately increase their employability. Their Three-Seasons Restaurant program involves students in every step of the process required to run a successful restaurant, similar to the model we saw at Mt. Diablo High School.

A number of schools in our District have programs that provide services to students looking to pursue a more lucrative career opportunity through postsecondary school. Opportunity Junction is a school whose job training and placement programs provide students with the prospect of learning the skills they missed during high school, while receiving paid internship experience. Not only can students achieve technical certifications, boosting their employability and the salary that they can command, but they can also pursue the Road Map to College Program, which provides students who have not previously had support in pursuing college a foundation of skills that will take them into their local community college and beyond. A student-created program that helps veterans understand and leverage their benefits in pursuit of gaining a college degree has helped Los Medanos Community College support their veterans, while helping the founder of the program pursue his own degree. Cal State East Bay is setting up an office of internships to help students make connections, get work experience, and in some cases make money. St. Mary's College is ensuring that all of its students have access to alumni who can help those students understand the financial ramifications of attending college and the repercussions of their loan policies.

Ultimately, colleges and universities in our district have supported students in gaining access to college by focusing on the service gap that confronts students when finishing high school. Students of color statistically have a much lower graduation rate because the skills necessary to be successful are less likely to be emphasized during their early education experience. Student populations require financial, social, emotional, and cognitive support (especially in under-represented populations) in order to maximize the number of student successes. These barriers are some of what our country is battling to make college truly accessible to all students of every family.

### **Support students in completing their degree programs**

During President Obama's first year in office, he set the ambitious goal of returning America to the top of the list of countries producing college graduates by 2020. He pursued this goal through actions on college affordability, access for all students, and transparency in the loan servicing sector. Though we have not yet reached that goal, we have gained perspective on what must be done in order to attain it.

As many full-time students do not have the time to work a full-time job and be in school full-time, the burden often falls on them to pay for their expenses without an income. The financial supports they need include tuition assistance as well as living expense assistance (such as housing, transportation, and food costs). Additional non-financial supports include career counseling to help students find the appropriate career pathway for them and

personal counseling, which offers students the chance to manage the challenges they experience that are frequently unrelated to academics but can negatively affect their performance and persistence. Research pertaining to the efficacy of these supports frequently demonstrates that while this strategy is typically underutilized, it produces significant gains in graduation rates.

Schools in our district have done all that they can to provide the resources mentioned above to students with the hopes of increasing the likelihood of graduation, but the resources are ineffective if they go unused. For this reason, schools across California and beyond have begun to use a strategy called Guided Pathways to facilitate students' awareness of and participation in all of these supports. This is in stark contrast to the old methodology where students were simply offered the chance to use these resources by their own will power, which resulted in the programs being far under-utilized.

Moving forward, it is important to provide students with supports related to persisting in spite of the challenges that they face while enrolled in institutions of higher education. Underserved populations demand the most attention, as these students face additional challenges in the college environment, but a focus on helping all students complete their degree program will lead to less student debt default and the financial stress that accompanies burdensome student loans. This focus will also assist students in leading happier, healthier, more secure lives.

## IV. Supporting Our Vision

Spending time in our schools allowed my office time to gauge the needs of our constituency in real-time and informed our actions with respect to the bills we introduced and sponsored during the 114th Congress. We introduced 18 pieces of original legislation, amended 7 bills that passed into law and cosponsored a plethora of bills introduced by other members. Below is a description of the bills that we introduced, along with a summary of some of the efforts we supported.

### Sponsorship:

- Improving Access to Higher Education Act: First-ever comprehensive legislation specifically addressing the needs of students with disabilities in higher education. This bill would promote college access and completion for students with disabilities.
- Family Engagement in Education Act: Awards grants to nonprofits for establishing Family Engagement Centers, while requiring states to establish plans related to strengthening family engagement in education. Research is clear that when a family participates in a child's education, the child is more successful. Much of this bill was included in legislation that later became law.
- Pell Grant Flexibility Act: Relieves the tax burden students experience when using Pell Grant funding to pay for non-tuition, college-related expenses. As we have explored, accessing higher education relies heavily on being able to afford housing, transportation, childcare, and food.
- Protecting Student Athletes From Concussions Act: Requires local education agencies to create and carry out a concussion safety and management plan to decrease the number of concussions sustained and prevent any student who has sustained a concussion from rejoining their sport's team until their safety has been assured. The lack of awareness surrounding concussions and the long-term damage that can be done to students' cognitive abilities must be addressed.
- Student Borrower Fairness Act: Ensures that the interest rates on federal student loans are no greater than the interest rates that the Federal Reserve offers to banks. The federal government should not be making money on the backs of our students.

### Cosponsorship Efforts:

We have worked hard to support bills that further equitable practices for all students in an educational setting. This also includes supporting IDEA's full funding. We have sought to normalize and empower groups that have experienced a history of discrimination by broadening the time frame when students can receive access to Pell Grant funding and restructuring how Pell Grant funding is awarded. This also includes simplifying the application for student aid and easing the rate at which students pay back student loans. We have fought to ensure that all students have access to fresh, nutritious foods for their entire school day. We have supported early learners and homeless and foster youth through several different pieces of legislation.

We have also worked tirelessly to support legislation that seeks to create positive school climates, while also helping students to get fair disciplinary treatment and provide fair consequences focused on helping students overcome the challenges that led to their mistakes. We have supported families playing a role in their child's education, while also seeking to ensure children learn about their social and emotional identities, alongside their academic identity. We have supported bills focused on helping students overcome addiction, as well as

increasing mental health resources. Finally, we have supported efforts to expand national service opportunities as a way to simultaneously provide finances for making college more affordable and to increase emotional maturity and “soft skills” in students coming out of high school, as well as providing students with real-world skills that are usable in all contexts of their life.

We have consistently supported teachers by seeking to use legislation to improve their compensation, provide better access to professional development, increase the number of opportunities they have to collaborate with one another, and improve the recruitment of new teachers to the profession. We have fought to ensure that computer science skills (including coding and graphic design) are a part of every child's education. We have cosponsored bills to ensure that the nation is training high-quality STEM teachers and incentivizing them to begin their careers in public schools. We have also supported the strengthening of career and technical education programs, while modernizing their operation to be geared towards 21st Century careers. In addition, we have supported the community college to workforce pipeline, ensuring that those schools are both confirming that all students have the support necessary in pursuing the careers they are interested in, while assisting them in making sound career decisions based on the expected workforce requirements.

## V. Challenges Ahead

There is an attack on the public education sector quickly approaching. The President's only experience with education appears to be his association with the for-profit Trump University and through this we can surmise that he would treat education like a business, unconcerned with student outcomes, only with the bottom line. Though details have been scarce, he has pledged to "repurpose" \$20 billion from the current \$87 billion federal education budget to launch a federal voucher program. If paired with an additional \$110 billion from already under-funded state education budgets (as he's suggested), this initiative will go further in undermining public education funding than any other federal initiative in the history of our country. The "repurposing" of funds would likely cannibalize a combination of Title I and IDEA funding, meaning the students most in need of support would be robbed in order to fund a school choice initiative that potentially benefits affluent students at the expense of students from poverty or students with special needs.

Further concerning is the fact that the President appointed Betsy DeVos to be the Secretary of Education. Secretary DeVos and her children have received all of their schooling in private schools and she herself has never worked in a school. Her sole experience in education stems from her philanthropic efforts promoting school-choice initiatives in Michigan, despite any evidence to support her investments. She has advocated simultaneously for a voucher program that limits school accountability while funneling money primarily to religious institutions. While Secretary DeVos could be commended on her propensity to give to a cause she believes in, the fact that she has never held an education-related job demonstrates that she is the least qualified Secretary of Education in U.S history.

The President and Secretary DeVos represent an existential crisis for public education. This, in combination with a Republican-controlled House and Senate that are often amenable to funding cuts connected to education, will require us to dig our heels in and defend all that we have gained in recent years. We will need to protect our focus on equity initiatives and the civil rights that all students deserve equally. Already we have seen the accountability measures Democrats negotiated into the bipartisan reauthorization of ESSA undone by a Republican-controlled Congress and strongly supported by the President. Secretary DeVos still has yet to signal in any genuine way that she will lead the country using the data that other nations (and even states in our country) have gathered demonstrating the efficacy of their systems.

Despite the trials we face from above, we will have to fight for continued teacher respect, while calling for compensation commensurate with the challenges of their charge. We will have to battle for the funding necessary to support consistent and rich student learning in the public realm. We will be required to protect the constitutional separation of church and state that is at the center of the school-choice debate. Public schools must be protected from dismemberment in the volatile political landscape that we find ourselves in.

## **VI. Realizing the Vision**

In concert with this defensive stance, we are also looking forward to supporting the positive efforts and effects that have been coming out of our community's schools. Our goal in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress is to find legislative solutions to the hurdles schools and students face, while incentivizing strategies that experience and research have shown are positive forces in educational communities. What follows are our overarching priorities (in line with Our Vision of an ideal education scenario for students) for the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress:

**Widely distribute the ELT Report within our District, among Education and Workforce Committee members, and others** - We look forward to distributing the ELT Report to both our education community as well as using it as a way to collaborate with other lawmakers and stakeholders. The report will be a useful tool in communicating our educational intent for the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress and sharing the great work being done in Contra Costa County.

**Give students a voice in Congress** - The ELT Report will help us demonstrate to students that they have a direct line to their member of Congress and that their input is crucial to our democracy.

**Raise awareness of affordability, access, and completion issues in underserved populations** - We will seek to provide this support through legislation, outreach efforts, and continued dialogue.

**Ensure that students/citizens have the education, training, and necessary skills to effectively enter the workforce** - 2017 will mark the start of the second phase of our education listening tour focused on the education to workforce pipeline. We will be travelling to schools and career centers, manufacturers and technology firms to help us define a set of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills that set students up for success in this pipeline, how to connect them with those skills, and what legislative efforts we can pursue to accomplish these goals.

## **VII. Conclusion**

If there is one silver bullet capable of overcoming the colossal challenges facing our country today, that bullet is education. As President James Madison once quipped, “[k]nowledge will forever govern ignorance; and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.” We envision an education system capable of preparing citizens to use this knowledge to thrive economically, socially, and emotionally in an increasingly complex world. We envision a citizenry that consistently engages in our civic process, making decisions guided by evidence and data, rather than based solely on ideology. We envision our country prospering because of robust, up-front education investments that are paid back many-fold in the future by a highly productive workforce defined by both professional and personal success.

We want to thank all of the community members who so graciously welcomed us into their schools and offices to discuss the state of education. We are excited to put this insight to use in crafting and protecting laws that do what all educational institutions should strive to do: put students first.

## VIII. Definition of Terms

- Equity- Giving all students what they need to be successful (not to be confused with equality, which is treating everyone exactly the same). Equity is the process, equality is the outcome.
- “Whole Child” Education- Ensuring that each child, in each school, in each community, is healthy, safe, engaged, supported and challenged.
- 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills- The skills that equip students to be productive and successful in the careers that characterize the 21<sup>st</sup> Century workforce
- Trauma-Informed Education- An educational approach which seeks to help students more effectively cope with trauma in their life, honoring the fact that trauma affects their behavior in school environments.

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