

Oregon PTA Conference

State Superintendent-Susan Castillo

Message recently delivered at Oregon PTA Conference in Salem

Thanks to all of you — the incredibly hard-working PTA volunteers who do so much behind the scenes to keep our schools going strong. In good times and tough times, you are there for our schools, for our children.

I have to applaud your dedication, because you're not just doing this for your own kids, but for all kids — especially the ones whose parents may not be able to step up and contribute in the same way. You may not always get the recognition you deserve. You are making a huge difference in the lives of hundreds of thousands of children in schools across this state, from Lake Oswego to Lakeview, Portland to Pendleton.

Given the state of the economy, I know some districts have had to leave positions unfilled, ask teachers to take pay cuts, slash professional development, turn down thermostats, cut spring sports programs, and take many other unpleasant measures to keep the school year intact. I know some districts have to close your doors early, but I am so impressed that the main focus throughout has been on saving as much instructional time for our students as possible. And that's the bottom line.

Looking ahead, I can tell you the projected hole in the state budget is expected to be over \$4 billion. We know this will have a profound impact on how we educate our students over the next two years. I don't know what the final numbers will be. But I want you to know that we are fighting every day in Salem for the very best budget we can get, one that will allow us protect us from more cuts and allow us to continue the vital work going on in our schools. I'll keep fighting 'til the last dollar is allocated.

At the same time, we are faced with a great opportunity. President Obama's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act has allocated approximately \$830 million in stimulus money to our state for education over the next 2 ½ years.

This federal money will not only help our schools get through the current crisis, but also help us make critical investments in education. When I recently met with President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan, they strongly emphasized the importance of using the money to make strategic investments. This is not business-as-usual money. This is a

chance to do business in a new way. To be innovative as never before.

The Obama Administration expects transparency in all we do, and I completely agree. We need to be accountable — not only to Washington or Salem, but to every student and taxpayer.

As we move forward with this initiative, I want to hear from you about ways you think we can invest this money. As PTA members, your perspective is unique. You are in the schools day-in and day-out. You see what's going on — what's working and what isn't. You can add incredible value to what we do, so I want to hear about what you think our schools are doing well, and what we can be doing better.

We believe that our high school graduates should leave school equipped with the foundation to set them up for success in whatever careers they choose — whether they go directly into the workforce or to college. And I have to tell you — the current system, based on seat time and simple credit accumulation, doesn't get the job done. Right now, students can stumble through school with a D average and still graduate.

That is not acceptable, not in the high-tech, hyper-competitive global economy we're living in. We must prepare our graduates to compete on a global scale — our country's prosperity depends on it.

So we're increasing the number of credit requirements in key areas, such as math and science. We're focusing on essential skills, such as the ability to read and to write effectively, the ability to use math to solve problems, and so on. We are saying that these skills are the building blocks of success, no matter the path students choose after graduating high school. And we're focusing in proficiency — the ability to master those skills.

I talk a lot about education equity and closing the achievement gap. Let me tell you that when we talk about closing the achievement gap, we're not talking about focusing on one group of students at the expense of another. This work is about ALL kids, regardless of what side of the achievement gap they might find themselves on. If only a select few kids are thriving, or if this district is doing well but the one next door isn't — then we're not doing our job. By setting up more students for success, we're doing better by everyone.

By raising the bar for high school, we're raising the stakes for our entire education system. We're putting every elementary and middle school on notice that they have got to raise the bar, too, in order to prepare students

for the new rigors of high school. That's why we've been pushing so hard to expand preschool and full-day kindergarten in schools. We want to get our kids the best start possible, because those 4- and 5-year olds are going to teenagers before you know it. The entire system has to be geared toward getting each and every student on track to graduate high school.

We're doing this in steps, phasing in the changes and putting resources in place so that we can ensure that these changes take hold.

So you can see, we have our share of challenges and opportunities. These times are both exciting and nerve-wracking, and I can tell you it will take all of us — educators, school staff, parents, community members — all of us working together, working harder and smarter, to make sure we make our schools the best they can be. I think every parent dreams of giving their children a chance at a brighter future. And ultimately, that's what our work is all about.