

March 18, 2026

The Honorable Darshana Patel  
Chair, Assembly Education Committee  
California State Assembly  
1020 N Street, Room 159  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Chair Patel and Members of the Assembly Education Committee,

I write to you as a former California State Superintendent of Public Instruction, having served in that role from 2003 to 2011, and prior to that as a member of the California State Legislature for twenty years. I am also a lifelong Democrat and a committed advocate for California's public schools. It is from that perspective, and with deep respect for both the Governor and this Committee, that I offer my views on Governor Newsom's proposal to restructure the governance of California's public education system.

Governor Newsom has been a strong champion for education during his time in office, and I give him high marks for his record. But a proposal of this magnitude requires us to look past personalities and consider long-term governance structure. Governor Newsom has less than a year remaining in office. The question before this Committee is not whether this governor would be a responsible steward of consolidated education authority, I believe he would. The question is whether every future governor should be granted the same structural control, regardless of their commitment to public education.

If the next two, three, or four governors treated education with the same care and priority as Governor Newsom, perhaps this concern would be less acute. But governance structures must be designed to withstand governors who do not share those values. The independently elected State Superintendent exists precisely to provide a check on that risk, someone whose sole accountability is to the voters, and whose sole mandate is the promotion and protection of public education.

During my tenure, I witnessed firsthand how the structural independence of the Superintendent's office serves as a practical safeguard for school funding and program delivery. On more than one occasion, the Governor's Department of Finance contacted my office and asked us to delay disbursing funds to school programs, suggesting that those dollars might be redirected to other state priorities. My response was consistent: my job was to get money out the door to schools as quickly as possible. And we did.

That may seem like a small thing, but it is not. A Superintendent housed within the Governor's executive structure would face institutional pressure to subordinate education funding decisions to broader budget and political considerations. An independently elected Superintendent answers to no one but the voters of California and the students they entrust to our public schools. That accountability matters.

The Governor already holds 100 percent of the appointments to the State Board of Education. This concentration of appointment power has, at times, produced policy outcomes that I believed were not in the best interest of students, even under a governor I respected and worked constructively with.

As an example: during the Schwarzenegger administration, the State Board adopted a policy requiring every eighth-grade student to take algebra, with no exceptions. I opposed that policy, not because I opposed algebra, but because the policy failed to provide any flexibility for students with special needs or English learners who had not yet achieved sufficient foundational skills. I made my case to the board. I lobbied individual members. But because every member was a gubernatorial appointee, the

Governor's preference prevailed. I slept well at night knowing I had done my job, but the policy outcome was wrong.

This experience underscores why an independently elected voice, one who can formally dissent, advocate publicly, and be held accountable to voters, is structurally important. Consolidating even more authority in the executive branch would reduce the already-limited counterweight the Superintendent provides to the Governor's board appointments.

I want to be fair and acknowledge where I believe the Governor's proposal addresses a real and longstanding gap. More than a decade ago, while I was serving as State Superintendent, I advocated for the Superintendent to become a voting member of the State Board of Education and a member of the Community College Board of Governors. The State Superintendent is already a UC Regent and a CSU Trustee, roles I found deeply valuable in my own tenure. Those positions allowed me to advocate for K-12 students as they transitioned into higher education, and to help UC and CSU understand what students needed to succeed.

The Superintendent has never played a comparable role for California's community colleges, and that is a mistake. To the extent the Governor's proposal closes that gap and creates a more seamless K-14 continuum with a consistent advocate across all segments of the education pipeline, I applaud it. That reform is overdue and sound.

I urge the Legislature to approach this proposal with care and deliberation. There are genuine inefficiencies in the current two-headed governance structure, and I do not dismiss that concern. But the solution to those inefficiencies should not be the wholesale consolidation of executive authority over public education.

I would encourage the Committee to consider a more targeted approach: strengthen the coordination mechanisms between the Superintendent and the Governor's office, address the community college representation gap, and clarify lines of authority where they are genuinely confusing - without eliminating the independent accountability that voters have long entrusted to an elected Superintendent.

California's public schools serve nearly six million students. They deserve a governance structure designed not for the best-case scenario, but for every scenario. The independently elected State Superintendent has been, and should remain, an essential part of that structure. Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective.

Respectfully,



**Jack O'Connell**

California State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2003–2011  
Member, California State Legislature, 1982–2002