January 2012 State Council – CTA President Dean E. Vogel

Good morning, State Council. I stand here today wishing that I had a different message to deliver. I know that the past few years have been rough on you…on our members…our students and their families. We’ve stood strong together…and I wish I could stand here and tell you, without a shadow of a doubt, that everything is going to be alright this year, that it’s going to get better, but I can’t.

We are a strong and resilient union, but at the risk of sounding like a Harry Potter movie -- we face uncertain times ahead. We are at critical time in the history or our association and our country. There are forces out there that want to silence our voice just so they can profit from our profession. They look at our students and see dollar signs and they look at our classrooms and see assembly lines. But there’s something standing in their way….US.

And I don’t know about you, but I don’t feel like moving. You see, educators have a different view: We look at students and see potential and promise. We see their struggles and triumphs every day. We look at a room full of students and see individuals, each different and special. And we know, for them to truly succeed, their educational experience must be tailored to fit their needs. It can’t be manufactured or standardized or sold to the highest bidder. Our students need an education where critical thinking and life skills are the goal, not some meaningless federally mandated finish line.

POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

For CTA and our members, this is going to be a tough and very demanding year. There are many complex issues and there are no easy solutions. The political playing field is unlike any I’ve seen before with corporate greed poised to strike anything that attempts to share the wealth. Franklin Delano Roosevelt said in his second inaugural address and it still rings true today. He said: “We have always known that heedless self-interest was bad morals, we now know that it is bad economics.”

Fast forward 75 years and bad economic policies are again destroying our democracy and making it almost impossible for the middle class to survive. Corporate greed led to the collapse of Lehman Brothers and to the sub-prime mortgage meltdown -- plunging the U.S. into recession, causing overseas economies to crumble and awakening the Occupy movement worldwide. We’ve seen the results play out here in California too -- with double digit unemployment rates, 40,000 plus educators losing their jobs, families struggling to pay for food and healthcare, and one in four students now living in poverty.

All the while, CEOs are banking record profits and refusing to pay their fair share. It’s not right. It’s not fair. And it has to stop. So how are we going to stop it? Well, first we have to understand what we are up against. That’s why I wanted to spend time this morning talking about the political landscape in California and the November election. It’s important we all know what we are facing and understand all the moving parts in this political game, so that we can come
together and chart the best course of action.

WHY'S AT STAKE

Here’s what we know, right now:
- A paycheck deception initiative has qualified for the ballot for the third time.
- The three top funding initiatives are jockeying for widespread support.
- A handful of business groups have filed a spending cap initiative to cut school funding and limit future state spending.
- And there are targeted initiative threats to our secure retirement.
- There’s also a Presidential election this year and
- a possible reauthorization of ESEA.

So as you can see, there’s a lot going on in a lot of different directions. What everyone can agree on is that our state is moving in the wrong direction and something must be done to fix it. Harder to reconcile is HOW are we going to do IT? That’s where we come in. The educator’s voice and insight is key to putting California on the road to recovery.

I know it feels like we’ve been beaten up a lot in the media in recent years…especially by Michelle Rhee and her teacher bashing billionaire friends…but poll after poll shows teachers are still the most respected and trusted members of their communities. And that’s why our friends and our enemies are watching this weekend. They know, what you and I know, because we’ve proved it time and again…that when CTA makes a decision, voters listen.

PAYCHECK INITIATIVE

So let’s talk some more about what’s on the ballot in November besides a Presidential election. The most important and most dangerous is the Paycheck Deception initiative you’ve already voted to oppose. Defeating this must be the top priority for the entire labor community, not just us. If this initiative passes, we won’t be able to advocate for our profession or our state…but corporations would be able to lobby for their interests. We get taken out of the picture. Corporations get the whole show.

Just think about it for a minute. What would it look like if we had no say in the political process at any level?
- 50 kids in a classroom, you bet
- Elimination of bargaining rights, sure
- No public education supporters on your local school board,
- Vouchers, Merit Pay, More tests….Yes, yes and yes.

If we left it up to the CEOs, how long do you think we’d have a 40-hour work week, a secure retirement, and safe working conditions all things our union and others fought hard for? Those behind this deceptive initiative aren’t seeking to protect your voice as an individual; they are seeking to annihilate it. If I sound paranoid, that’s because I know what they are after. They are after us. They know that as a union of educators we will always put students before profits and learning before mandates.
But there’s no way to win this fight without making sure our members understand what is really at stake. And that’s going to take a lot of educating and organizing by all of us. Someone has to be there to stand up for our schools, our students and their families, and the communities we live in. For those of you who were around in 2005, you know defeating this type of initiative will take a lot of time, energy and resources. The good news is we’ve done it before and we aren’t doing it alone. A coalition of labor partners has already come together to plan for battle.

**FUNDING INITIATIVE**

We are also going to have to join another broad coalition to pass a funding initiative. It is clear California cannot cut its way out of its ongoing budget problem. It is way past time for a tax increase, and we must help lead the way in getting a revenue package approved. Right now, there are three funding initiatives to choose from: The Governor’s, CFT /Courage Campaign’s, and Molly Munger’s.

You approved criteria over a year ago for CTA to use in reviewing any funding initiative. You said it must be progressive in nature and promote tax fairness; that it funds public education and other essential services; that it generates $8 billion to $10 billion in order to help close the state budget deficit; and that it can attract a broad coalition so that it has the best chance of winning. This is the criteria the CTA Board of Directors used to evaluate all the funding initiatives proposed for the November ballot and what led us to recommending a support position for the Governor’s Initiative. This was not an easy decision for us. We argued seriously and intently.

But after reviewing the latest information about these initiatives, how they are written, and how they measure up to our criteria, the Board came to the decision to recommend the Governor’s initiative. Here’s why:

- It’s progressive in nature. For 5 years, it raises income taxes on households earning $500,000, and raises taxes even higher for those earning more than $1 million. The proposal also includes a half penny sales tax increase for four years.

- It puts money into an account designated for K-14 education, but because that money is also part of the minimum funding guarantee, it frees up additional dollars in the general fund to be spent for higher education and other essential services. This is also the only proposal that pays for the realignment of local health and public safety services approved by the Legislature last year. Without money to pay for that realignment, the state budget deficit will grow bigger each year, and we will all face more cuts. Year after year....

- The balanced approach of the tax proposal and how funds would be used is designed to generate broad support. SEIU State Council has already taken a support position. The governor wants to pull together a broad coalition of labor, community and business groups. We must have the broadest coalition possible to have a chance at passing any funding initiative. Otherwise, everyone loses.

- The governor’s initiative is the only proposal that directly helps reduce the state budget deficit. Without that component, our schools and colleges are facing another $5 billion cut. Now
the only other initiative that comes close to meeting our criteria is the CFT/Courage Campaign initiative. Honestly, it's the most progressive of the proposals. We gave them staff and worked with them. But as it is written, there are some unintended consequences. This initiative doesn’t help close the current budget deficit and does not pay for the local realignment. There also another big issue: It doesn’t help restore program cuts to essential services. While I know it was not the intent of the sponsors, it is a reality we have to acknowledge.

IMPORTANT DECISIONS

We have some important decisions to make this weekend. The Political Involvement Committee will be taking a look at these three initiatives today and coming to us with a recommendation tomorrow. I know some of you already have strong opinions about which of these we should support, but we’ve got to come together and do what we always do: look at the facts, debate the issue, and make the right decision for our students and our state. Look, I know that in the end, none of the funding proposals out there solve our long-term funding needs, but we must come together with the broadest coalition possible to have a chance at passing any funding initiative. If we are not united and have multiple proposals on the ballot, we all lose.

CONCLUSION

Losing is not an option for this election and victory isn’t going to be easy. But together, we have a powerful voice and tremendous energy and a successful track record. While the attacks on us seem to be coming from all sides these days…know this: they wouldn’t be attacking us if they weren’t scared of us. And they should be. We are about to go to battle for the future of this organization and our profession.

You and I know what our enemies can’t seem to learn: This 800-pound gorilla, or relentless political machine - it doesn't matter what you call us - gets upset when you keep poking at it or try to hurt its students. Seriously though, I can’t stress enough the importance of defeating the Paycheck Deception initiative. We have to make sure all of our members understand what’s really at stake. If it passes, not only do we lose the ability to make positive changes in our classrooms, on our school boards or in our communities…we lose the ability to make positive changes in our country.

The occupy movement unearthed an evil truth. It's about the growing inequality in this country. And it can't be ignored. If corporations continue to get the upper hand, all gaps will widen: the income gap, the opportunity gap, the achievement gap. It’s time to end corporate welfare for big businesses that ship jobs overseas and don’t care whether our kids and workers are educated at home. And it’s time for people at the top to pay their fair share.

American bankruptcy expert Elizabeth Warren says it this way: “There is nobody in this country who got rich on their own. Nobody. You built a factory out there - good for you. But I want to be clear. You moved your goods to market on roads the rest of us paid for. You hired workers the rest of us paid to educate. You were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for. You didn’t have to worry that marauding bands would come and seize everything at your factory. Now look. You built a
factory and it turned into something terrific or a great idea - God bless! Keep a hunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along."

In closing, I’m reminded of a Native American Proverb that I think represents what going on in our country right now. It goes something like this: A grandfather is talking to his young grandson and tells the boy he has two wolves inside of him struggling with each other. The first is the wolf of peace, love and kindness. The other wolf is fear, greed and hatred. The young boy looks up at his grandfather and asks, “Which wolf will win, grandfather?” To which he replies, "Whichever one you feed."

And that’s what we are facing in these uncertain times. Which wolf will survive? Will corporate greed starve the rest of us? Or will this country come together and fight for the return of democratic values and fairness and equity? I know, like me, you still believe in a strong America and a prosperous California. And I know that when educators help lead the way, all of California will have a much better future.