

May 8, 2000

Dear Colorado Teacher:

During recent months, the debate over public education reform generated a tremendous amount of discussion as well as some misunderstanding regarding both the substance and the goals of our reform package. Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to share with you why I supported these reforms and how they may impact you as a teacher.

First, as a father of three children who attend – and have always attended – public schools, I am deeply committed to public education. As a Governor who regularly visits public schools, I know that teachers face many pressures and challenges – such as parents with little interest in their child's education and disruptive students in the classroom.

In developing my education reform package I did listen to teachers – as well as principals, parents, superintendents, school board members and others. At the request of teachers, my education package, as recently signed into law, includes the following:

- **Full funding for K-12 education.** During the two years that I have served as Governor, we've squeezed savings from other areas of state government to ensure that K-12 funding increases to cover inflation plus student enrollment growth. The total new dollars for K-12 education in the past two years is \$371 million, which is \$86 million above inflation plus student enrollment growth.
- **Reduced class sizes.** By funding above inflation this year and freeing school districts from assessment and retirement costs, local school districts have millions of additional dollars that they can use, if the local administration so chooses, to reduce class size.
- **L.E.P., special education and mobility exclusions from CSAP.** Under our plan, students who are non-proficient in English will not have their CSAP scores counted for the first three years, CSAP scores will not be counted for students who move into the state after the October count, and students with disabilities will be tested at the appropriate grade level, determined by their IEP.
- **CSAP diagnostic reporting.** Starting next year, the CSAP will include diagnostic reporting on each student – much like ITBS or Terra Nova supply. This, combined with the expansion of the CSAP program to test reading, writing and mathematics every year in grades 3 through 10, means that before the start of each school year teachers will be able to see a diagnostic report on each of their students.

- **Teacher Professional Development.** Over and over I heard from teachers that they need more time and resources for professional development. That is why our program targets millions of new dollars to this critical area. Principals may apply directly to the state for grants to implement a building-specific professional development strategy. For instance, principals will now have the funds to pay master teachers to coach other teachers in their buildings.
- **\$1,100 per pupil for elementary school literacy.** My Read to Achieve grant program makes available \$1,100 in new money per pupil for every third grade student reading below proficiency. These funds are in addition to the overall increases of K-12 funding. This money will allow schools to implement proven strategies to raise literacy levels among second and third grade students. The funds can be used to purchase reading curriculum, train teachers, pay salaries for summer school or after school programs, create in-school reading clinics, and other efforts to teach children to read. I championed *Read to Achieve* for a simple reason: I want every child in Colorado to read at or above grade level by the time they enter fourth grade.
- **Freedom to enforce classroom rules and remove disruptive students.** Teachers regularly tell me that it is difficult for them to maintain an orderly learning environment because they receive little support from school administrators when trying to remove disruptive students from the classroom. That is why we put into state law the ability for teachers to remove a disruptive student from the classroom and to ensure the disruptive student does not return to their classroom for the remainder of the term. To assist schools in dealing with disruptive students, our plan allocates several million dollars in new funding for services for high-risk students.
- **School construction funding.** Our plan also devotes \$190 million for K-12 capital construction needs over the next decade – which is the first time in history the state will fund local school construction.

As I am sure you are aware, our plan also includes the creation of an accountability report card on each public school in the state. I proposed the school report cards at the urging of parents who repeatedly asked for an easy-to-understand way to learn more about their school. Much of the focus on school report cards was on whether or not letter grades should be assigned to individual schools for their academic performance. Letter grades were selected for a simple reason: The research shows that parents overwhelmingly want letter grades – for them it is a familiar and readily understood measurement tool. Enclosed for your review is an example of a school report card as approved by the legislature.

One of the biggest misconceptions about the letter grades is that every year there will be a certain number of “F” schools. Only in the first year, when the grading scale is set, will there be a guaranteed number of “F” schools – two percent to be exact. In future years, the scale remains unchanged, which gives schools that improve student performance the opportunity to raise their letter grade. We chose to grade on a curve the first year because it will give a better distribution of expected school performance. It makes more sense than

grading on a straight standard, because fully 56% of Colorado's schools currently do not have 70% (C or above) of their students proficient in reading, writing and math.

At the request of teachers, the school report cards also include a letter grade measuring school improvement. This way schools that may be "C" in achievement but are improving receive credit for their hard work in raising student achievement.

I believe it is important to recognize and reward academic success. That is why my education reform plan creates an award program for public schools. As signed into law, schools that receive an overall academic performance grade of "D" or "F" on the school report card, but show improvement, will receive two-thirds of all award money in recognition of their hard work. The remainder of the award money is devoted to the highest performing schools overall. They, too, deserve recognition for their hard work. I believe that the awards – \$5,000 to \$15,000 depending on school size – signify the importance Coloradans place on academic improvement and excellence.

However, contrary to an "urban legend" that seems to have sprung up, *no school's base funding is dependent on the academic performance grade they receive*. In fact, under my budget all schools will receive more funding.

Some critics of my plan claim that giving an "F" to a school unfairly stigmatizes the teachers and students in the school. I disagree. Time and again I have seen – in Colorado and in other states – that when a school is clearly identified as troubled, it serves as a wake-up call for parents, the community, and the teachers to pull together and improve the school. It was only when Bessemer Elementary in Pueblo realized that they were failing their children that they undertook a major restructuring of their curriculum, use of federal dollars, and other steps necessary to raise student performance.

I understand the challenges that you as a teacher face. I know that many children do not have home lives that emphasize learning or prepare them for school. But I also know that just because a child is poor or a minority does not mean they are not smart or cannot learn. During the approximately seven hours a day that a child is at school, we should do all we can to ensure that they learn the basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics. We owe the child at least that.

As I have said before, when it comes to providing a quality education, teachers are our single most important asset. You are the backbone of public education in Colorado. Please be assured that in this era of increased accountability for public schools, I am committed to you and your profession.

Sincerely,

Bill Owens
Governor