

STATE OF COLORADO

EXECUTIVE CHAMBERS

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Bill Owens
Governor

December 15, 2000

Dear Educator:

Last week, I announced a blueprint for spending the funds provided by Amendment 23, as well as changes to my school accountability plan, Senate Bill 186. During the past year, I have visited scores of public schools, listening to principals, teachers and parents. My proposals reflect extensive listening to and consideration of your concerns.

First and foremost, I believe teachers and parents want to ensure that all new dollars go directly to the classroom to be as beneficial to the child as possible. That is why my proposals target funding at specific needs that teachers and principals have told me again and again are their top priorities.

Teachers have told me that they want help in their classroom, and principals have said that they need funding at the individual school level to address their unique needs. Therefore, to the chagrin of some school district administrators, my plan grants these funds directly to individual schools, not requiring these dollars to pass first through the district bureaucracy.

My plan calls for investing \$500 million over the next ten years in the following areas:

- **Teacher Pay Incentives.** My plan devotes \$51.3 million during the next four years to provide bonuses for teachers. School principals will receive grants to pay up to \$10,000 per teacher to reward outstanding performance by their best and brightest teachers. They could also use this money to pay recruitment bonuses for teachers who agree to teach in hard-to-recruit rural or inner-city schools, and to pay bonuses for teachers who teach in difficult subjects like math, science and special education. I want to reward teachers for their performance and for their commitment to our children.
- **Reducing Class Size.** Under my plan every school will receive the extra one percent of funding called for by Amendment 23. For schools with large class sizes, we will require that they first devote this money to reducing K-3 class size to no more than 17 students. Schools with low enrollment, or those that have already reduced their class size, will have the freedom to use this extra one percent in other ways to raise student achievement. My plan phases in this K-3 class size cap over ten years so schools will have time to plan for their hiring, building and capital needs. During this time, schools will receive from the state more than \$375 million in additional funding to reduce class size.

- **Special Education Funding.** I am proposing to add nearly \$6.5 million next year to the special education categorical – on top of full funding – to reduce the burden of this unfunded mandate, and to allow schools to provide more services to our students with special needs.
- **School Improvement Grants.** As Colorado’s lowest-performing schools implement reform plans during the next two years, the state will provide these schools with \$5.6 million to assist them in their efforts to raise student achievement.
- **Capital Construction Assistance.** Earlier this year, for the first time in Colorado history, I signed into law a plan to provide more than \$100 million in capital construction assistance for Colorado’s poorest school districts. I now believe it is time to provide equity in capital funding for public charter schools. My plan will provide public charter schools with about half of the annual per pupil capital spending that public neighborhood schools receive. This does not take any money away from local school districts, but reflects the fact that charter schools *are* public schools and they need to be funded as such.
- **Full-day Kindergarten.** I believe that we need to fund a pilot program that provides full-day kindergarten for low-income children in Colorado’s lowest performing elementary schools. My plan sets aside \$12.9 million to give these students – who often arrive at school the least prepared to learn – more time and instruction in their kindergarten classroom.
- **New Textbooks.** I know that teachers need up-to-date books in their classroom to provide a world-class education for their students. My plan will provide \$29.2 million in grants *directly to your school* so that teachers and principals can decide for themselves what books to buy for their classrooms.

These initiatives comply with both the letter and the spirit of Amendment 23. The language of the ballot initiative passed by voters clearly spells out specific areas where those new funds can be spent. In order to fulfill Amendment 23’s requirement that K-12 funding increase by inflation plus one percent each year, we must put aside a portion of the Education Fund to hedge against future inflation. If the economy is good, we could accrue a substantial surplus in the Fund. But should the economy go into a recession, the Fund could be bankrupt within a relatively few years. I believe we must use prudent and reasonable forecasts that protect our future, while allowing for needed investment in education today. My plan does just that.

In addition to the above funding initiatives, I also announced two changes to my school accountability plan. Rather than use letter grades to measure school academic performance, I believe that we should describe overall academic performance using the following descriptions: excellent, high, moderate, low or unsatisfactory for overall academic performance.

From the very beginning, my goal in reforming public education has been to ensure that every child has a safe school, a quality teacher and an education that prepares them to succeed. I've met with and listened to thousands of parents and teachers during the past year. They've told me that the controversy surrounding letter grades is getting in the way of why we are measuring schools – to ensure that no child falls behind or is left behind, and to better determine which schools most need our help to improve.

I therefore decided to replace letter grades with a different set of understandable and parent-friendly descriptions for explaining school academic performance.


In addition, at the request of high school principals, I am recommending a “trial run” this year in requiring all 11th grade students to take the ACT. This national college entrance and vocational exam will still be administered statewide and will be paid for by the state in the spring of 2001, but scores will not be used this first year to measure high school academic performance.

Colorado and Illinois are the two states in the nation leading the way with the ACT. Principals explained to me that we should use this first year to work through issues regarding test days, test site security, school schedules and NCAA scholarship students.

I appreciate your taking the time to read this letter. As I said in my last letter to you, I know that Colorado's educators are dedicated and hard working. My aim is to provide more resources directly to schools and the classroom where you can put these new funds to work.

Thank you for what you do for our children.

Sincerely,


Bill Owens
Governor

P.S. If you would like to see a revised version of the school accountability reports, you may find one on the Web at http://www.state.co.us/schools/accountability_report.htm