

TRANSCRIPT

California Department of Education's Resources and Support for Common Core Implementation: Part II

SPEAKER Nancy Brownell

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NANCY BROWNELL Good afternoon. Happy to see so many people that I've known over the years. First off, a couple of things. I am just incredibly lucky to have grown up as an educator in this state. I like to say that I have been either on the receiving end or the delivery end of education in this state for now almost 60 years. Given the fact that I started out as a student in San Juan School District. Where are the San Juan people? I have been gone so long I don't even recognize—I know they were on the list. Are they somewhere? I was both a student and began my career in San Juan School District in the Sacramento area, and I've had the pleasure over the years of working with lots of great mentors and great projects. Like many of you, in my own career I was one of those—began my teaching at about the first go-around of Mike Kirst and Jerry Brown, which I find to be also a kind of interesting synchronicity in the world.

I was a brand-new teacher, and we had a surplus of teachers at that particular time. I was surplus for the first five years as a special ed teacher because there were too many teachers for the positions available, and ended up saying, "Well, gee, Brownell, you did this last year. Why don't you do this this year?" And not being smart enough to say, "Wait a minute," I always said, "Yes, that's good" or "Yes." And in later years my father, who I lost not too long ago, commented that "You know, you may be pretty good at what you do, but you sure have a hard time keeping a job" because I tried a lot of new things and, like many of you, I like to learn. The only reason I am a good teacher is because I have to learn things about the world of education. And so the opportunity to come and be a member of both the Department of Education and staff to the State Board in this time of transition has been a real learning opportunity, but it's also been an opportunity to connect with lots of people that I have worked with over the years in the state. So particularly, hello to my county office colleagues, who I spent much time with over the last few years and who are still there moving forward with their districts. The district leadership people, my colleagues from El Dorado County,

who I was looking for and didn't see you sitting up here, so happy to see all of you in my home district.

As Christopher mentioned, what struck me in some of the conversations—having been a former school board member; you know, I am one of those. I jokingly said to my superintendent at the time I'd left Rescue School District in El Dorado County—we thought we were going to have a turnover of three board members on our board at one time, and I'd been employed in the district but had gone to work for the county supes. And I jokingly said to this superintendent at the time, “Well, gee, maybe I should run for the school board.” She said, “That is a great idea!” So I did; so I ran for school board and I won. Didn't know anything about governance from the perspective of sitting on the board side. Incredible opportunity working with both California school boards, and Holly was there at the time among others, really thinking about the role your school board members play. And the value of them being in the conversation, and the messaging as representatives from the community. So please remember to help them understand the whys—I liked that—compelling whys mentioned earlier.

So in this unique role that I get to sort of make up as I go along, with guidance from Deb and Sue Burr and Tom Torlakson and Mike Kirst, the opportunity really is to focus on outreach. As we well know, for those of us that have been in this business for a while, the ideas around top-down and bottom-up change have been a part of my structure of learning from many, many years with many of you in terms of Michael Fullan's work and many others. And what I find really fascinating is this seems to be weighted towards a much more bottom-up focus at this particular time, right? That we've been through an incredible standards-based learning curve in our state, beginning in the 90s through a very, shall we say, tightly coupled approach to curriculum, instruction, assessment, right? In ways that some of us probably didn't predict would get quite so tightly coupled. And now we're sort of moving to a more loosely coupled structure in our organizations. And the opportunity to be able to think about what is it that our children and youth in our state, in every state, are going to need to know and be able to do to be successful out there in whatever the world looks like is a just incredible question that I know we all keep asking ourselves, looking at the range of change just over the last few years.

And the support that we need from our community partners, from our parents, from our teachers, from our leadership, much of the work is around engagement, right? How do we engage at multiple levels among our constituents and help everybody understand what we're doing and why we're doing it and why we think it's good for the children and youth that we work with. With some uncertainty in there, right? That we've gone from where we've been—I am reminded of William Bridge's work on transitions,

right? That we're in this very transitional period, that the new evolving models are really not as firmed up as we would like them to be. And one of the hallmarks of a 21st century leader, right, is high tolerance for ambiguity. Well, watch out what you ask for, right? High tolerance for ambiguity is going to be the nature of where we are for a little while. But within that we have to create some opportunities to have conversations, to communicate with the mutual constituents, and to try to build some sort of two-way systems in a little more formal way. Because the State Board of Education, our colleagues in the department want to also hear what's going on out there in the field. What's working? What's not? What are some areas that might be of benefit to everybody. And in this more open-source context, I think that's a great opportunity because we have a lot of great ideas that are sort of percolating up as well as some more formal structures about how we might navigate through this more difficult next set of learning opportunities.

And like many of you, this idea that we also are trying to look at the feedback loops, both formally and informally, that allow us to kind of keep everybody moving forward. As I think Chris mentioned, among others, this idea that we've talked about in our state, in other states, and in education as a whole about continuous improvement, right? I don't know where their there is anymore. I do have a three-year-old grandson, and another one on the way, that is learning in very different ways than my own kids learned. And so in thinking about what is he going to need in school, what are those jobs going to be, it's way different probably than what I had anticipated as I thought about going into teaching many, many years ago. But the goal is every child in our state, every child across the country is expecting us to figure it out, right? Well, good for us. Then we better figure it out, right? We don't get too many chances to shift a huge system like education to a whole different way of thinking about what is teaching and what is learning. And we'll probably makes some mistakes along the way; I wouldn't be surprised. But if we collaborate, if we keep the conversation going, if we're trying to look at how do we continue to communicate what the priorities are, both at the classroom and community level and at the policy level, maybe we have a chance to really make some great in-roads even in these tough financial times.

Lastly, I think this idea of leveraging what's happening—again, I think one of the advantages, as we heard from several of the people this morning, about the idea that this is really a national conversation, I think. Although it's kind of hard, with all the buzz out there in the national conversation levels to know if education is still as important as it was, I think, in my early years in California. Because the value of how we move forward for this just great diverse group of students that we find sitting in our classrooms every day, you know, whose parents are struggling on some levels, who have a chance to kind

of figure out what does it means to really learn deeply and at high levels, is a very heavy conversation, I think, that is worth having.

And so in thinking about outreach, in thinking about partnering, the opportunity that the board, and Superintendent Torlakson, the governor have said, lets also model how we're talking about this and have somebody who works for both the department and the State Board as a way to help, again, build some of these within the organizational structures that are very complex and yet who all have everybody's best interest in mind, right? It's not for want of good intention that we sort of can't quite do everything that we need to do. The complexities of teaching and learning, the opportunity to really look at how we think about the needs of our English learners around much more complex structures of language in the context of the Common core, how we move into math practices along with fluency and algorithms, how we don't forget about art and science and social sciences with our colleagues who say what about us, what about us?

So this resource-rich environment that is both national and in the local context that you all work in and at the Department of Education is, I think, one of the great opportunities we have to continue to work together to build some of these communicative ways that we might share what's working and learn from hard lessons. And my hope is that across our state in the next few years, along with other states, we really can began to shape and forge that if we are going to talk about what it means to learn and teach in a 21st century environment when we still really have a lot of trappings of the 19th century structurally out there in our system, that we ought to be doing it collaboratively. And I am also reminded of Alfred Korzybsky's work around—his famous quote of “The map is not the territory,” right? That we have a map of Common Core Standards, and new assessments, and opportunities to engage in different ways, but the complex hard work of the day-to-day learning of every student, every classroom, every day is way harder, I think, than it ever was. But it's so worth figuring out for every kid who's out there, whether three-year-old or thirty-year-old. How do we really look at our system in a different way and work together to improve it

So the senior fellow has a lot to do, I think, with my gray hair, although I think it should be the senior fellowette, given the terminology in my early learning. But my hope is, in partnership obviously with many of you, if there are things that are happening in your district, if there are events or activities, the board, the department really would like to know about that. We're trying to also put together some best practices web pages. I've only been on board since April, so we have plenty of work to do. But the hope is that we can share some of these great activities so that others can learn, and how we go about doing that is also an important role in the communication.

So Barb's going to talk more explicitly about some of the current resources that are in place that we want to sort of at least spend a little bit of time so you know and make sure that you are getting information that you need and you want and that you also know how to communicate with it. So, thanks. I look forward to working with all of you in more detailed ways.