

## **Open Letter to Education Community from Sen. Rosemary McAuliffe**

April 20, 2009

Dear friends,

This has been one of the most difficult and bittersweet weeks in my time in our Legislature. We passed House Bill 2261, to redefine Basic Education. I envisioned the day we would all do this together, but to my deep disappointment that did not happen.

Still, it is time to move forward.

The bill the Senate passed last week shines a bright light on how the state funds our schools with an outdated definition of basic education. It gives us the tools to know how we must change our funding to better reflect the growing expectations and challenges our schools face. What will be our class size? Does each school have enough teachers, librarians, nurses, counselors and speech therapists to help students excel? And how many administrators does each school need? These are the questions that this legislation will help us answer.

The bill is not perfect, but it is our road map to the world-class educational system envisioned by Washington Learns that every one of us deeply wants. We may not be able to solve all the problems facing our educational system today but we must begin. It is time to take this step.

I have heard that this is the wrong bill and the wrong message at the wrong time. I have heard that it is an insult to our hard-working teachers and educators that come to work every day and are committed to providing every child with the opportunity to learn. I want to be clear - teachers are the single most important part of our educational system. This bill is not a commentary in any way about a failure of our teachers. It is a recognition that our teachers deserve better and a recognition that our state's definition of basic education has failed to keep pace with the evolving expectations of society and has failed our teachers.

So why do we need this bill now, of all times? Because our class size is 46th in the nation. Because our dropout rate is between 20 and 30 percent, and our teacher compensation is 21st in the nation. That is unacceptable. Our students and our educators deserve much more than an education system that was defined 30 years ago. I know that changing an educational system for almost 1 million students and over 2,000 schools takes time. It cannot happen in one legislative session. However, we must not let an inability to make immediate whole-scale change discourage us from making any progress.

We need to fund what we value and we must ensure that our commitment to education is clearly defined. Only by clearly establishing our Constitutional duties now can we hold the state accountable in the future. There are many demands on our limited state resources - health care, family leave, hospitals and nursing homes, to name only a few. As we come out of this recession, and as the economy grows, our educational system needs to be first in line for restoration of cuts. It must remain at the top of the priority list for future investments. In order to provide the educational system the capacity to accommodate those investments, planning and phase-in must start now. An expanded definition of basic education obligates our state to fully fund the educational system that our teachers, schools, students and communities need today.

With this expanded definition in place, the state can start the process of preparing the system for future growth.

We also have a unique opportunity right now to try and access additional federal stimulus dollars to help us with initial, one-time investments. This legislation makes us more competitive to receive part of the more than \$4 billion that is available for states in the "Race to the Top" grant. The "Race to the Top" funds are available to states that are making exceptional progress towards educational reform goals such as rigorous college- and career-ready standards, creation of data systems that help foster continuous improvement and a process for providing intensive support for challenged schools. The legislation passed by the Senate includes provisions and a plan for addressing each of these goals in a meaningful way and will hopefully help the state of Washington access this additional federal money.

For all of these reasons, I support the important and difficult step we took this past week. This legislation is not the end goal, only the beginning. It reflects months of hard work and negotiation with all education stakeholders. The bill passed by the Senate incorporates language from both the Full Funding Coalition's proposal and recommendations from the Basic Education Task Force. It strives to plot a way forward with a realistic implementation strategy based on shared responsibility and expectations for the state, school districts, and schools. We must continue to embrace a respectful and steady process forward, and I pledge that I will be here every step of the way.

We will do this together. This is about our children.

Yours,

Sen. Rosemary McAuliffe  
Chair, Senate Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee

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