

Adams County Education Consortium  
May 17, 2006  
Remarks by Jared Polis

## INTRODUCTION

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. Adams County is unique in so many ways – it includes urban, suburban, and rural areas in many distinct communities and municipalities. It's ethnically diverse, and contains more school districts than any other county.

I've had the honor of serving this great county over the last 5 plus years, working with the education leaders individually and as part of public events and meetings. In the past couple years, I've visited with school boards and other district leaders, and community members in Mapleton, Westminster, Adams 12, and Adams 14. I've had the pleasure of communicating with school boards in Adams 14, Brighton, and Aurora Public Schools to propose a new school, which I'll discuss later, that focuses on English language acquisition.

I congratulate you on developing the Adams County Education Consortium, and for your exciting and innovative initiatives that help students gain more real world, business experiences.

During my short talk to you today, I will update you on what's been happening at the state level on some relevant issues and tell you about a new school that I've been involved with. These actions have implications for business and education in Adams County.

## Background

Some important Adams County trends that have immense implications for your education and business policies have struck me as notable.

First, the county is experiencing significant growth in the numbers and percentage of Hispanic families. Last month, a Piton Foundation report found that new births to Hispanic mothers now outnumber new births to White moms. Denver is the only other metro-area county to experience this demographic circumstance. Colorado's reliance on migrant workers adds to this trend.

Second, poverty rates continue to be prevalent in large sections of the county. In fact, 20 percent of Hispanic children under age 5 in Adams County live in poverty, and many of them are born to teenage and undereducated mothers. About 70% of Adams 14 students qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch, and nearly half of Westminster and Mapleton students qualify.

Third, certain areas of the county as you know are experiencing and are expected to experience a great deal of population growth, including Brighton and the E-470 corridor.

Fourth, Adams County school districts are tremendous leaders in education innovation and reform. Mapleton's restructuring of its high schools, and next year its other schools is such a promising model for student learning that state and national leaders are watching closely. Both Adams 12 and Brighton have been doing excellent work on expanding public school choice – Adams 12 charters the Colorado Virtual Academy, the state's largest online school, and Brighton has worked very well with its charter school options. Westminster continues to be a state leader in community engagement and student civic participation. And Adams 14 provides an array of educational opportunities for needy students, a prevalent population in that district. Metro-area districts are also working on effective early childhood education with county and other local efforts.

## STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION (SBE)

So what is the State Board of Education, you ask? What do we do? The state constitution gives us general supervision of the public schools. But what does that mean in a local control state? The state board has 8 members and each is elected to a six-year partisan term. Our specific responsibilities include:

- Hiring and supervising a commissioner to run the Colorado Department of Education (CDE)
- Approving education rules to implement state and federal laws
- Enforcing state standards and educational quality through school district accreditation
- Approving teacher licenses, teacher preparation programs, and teacher training programs; and
- Hearing and ruling on charter school appeals after denials by local school districts.

#### SBE Issues

During the past 8 months, the state board has focused its actions on supporting needy students, exploring access to postsecondary opportunities, and promoting youth involvement. I will briefly touch on a few examples of these.

#### CTAG rules

A few months ago, we passed a rule to implement the state law on Closing the Achievement Gap. Enacted three years ago, this law requires the state Department of Education to provide assistance to schools with significant achievement gaps in test scores between poor and non-poor students and between white and minority students.

As required by the law, we had to define “significant achievement gap” and did so by identifying schools with such gaps in reading and math scores that exceed the state average gap for the current and prior year. Unfortunately, the legislature denied increased funding for this effort.

#### Early college/Fifth-Year Programs

Last fall the State Board of Education debated whether to allow state K-12 education funding for dual enrollment/early college programs or what are sometimes called Fifth Year programs, meaning that a student can earn college or community college credit while they are enrolled in a fifth year of high school prior to earning a high school diploma. Despite the clear success of these innovative programs in helping poor and minority students gain access to higher education at Lincoln and Sheridan High Schools, our commissioner pressed us to maintain our rule that prohibits funding for such programs. The 4 of us who tried to repeal the rule argued that state law allows support for the programs under the Post Secondary Enrollment Options Act, and that we heard a mischaracterization of a state auditor report as a reason to prohibit them. At a heavily attended hearing on the rule last September, we heard from district and school leaders who told us about the programs’ success, but the board voted 4-4 to keep the rule.

#### Other SBE

Other recent state board activities have included proposing fairer ways to implement No Child Left Behind and establishing a rule to measure high school graduation and completion rates more accurately. We also set legislative priorities for education again this year, which you have in your handout, and some of which I’ll mention.

#### LIFELONG LEARNING - STATE-LEVEL EFFORTS

Your emphasis on lifelong learning is critical to students’ success in schools. In regard to this notion, Colorado policymakers are lately talking about a P-16 approach, meaning looking at the entire education system from preschool through post secondary. The legislature just passed a bill to set up a P-16 council, the governor last year created an education alignment council, and commissions such as the state high school improvement commission that I co-chaired last year recommended a P-16 approach.

#### Early Childhood Education

As you all know, benefits of good preschool range from stronger academic success to economic success to crime reduction, each with substantial cost savings. As reported at your county’s early childhood summit last fall, proven effects include better test scores and graduation rates, lower special education placements, less grade retention, better future job earnings, less reliance on social services, and fewer arrests. This year, the

legislature passed more funding for the state's preschool program and expanded local early childhood councils to coordinate key services.

#### Family literacy

Central to the intergenerational importance of effective education is family and adult literacy. The Colorado legislature, for the first time, appropriated \$200,000 for family literacy in this year's budget. And the federal Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) may also see a funding increase this year.

#### Career and Financial Education

The Adams County Education Consortium has already succeeded in enhancing and increasing the crucial efforts to educate students about the real world demands of business, jobs, career, and finances. School districts in your county and throughout the state are taking this on as well. The Mapleton School District, for example, opened Skyview Big Picture High School to provide students with a chance to actively explore their interests through a learning internship and project-based activities, such as portfolios and exhibitions.

Financial education, another consortium priority, is extremely important for all students. Colorado is in the midst of implementing its 2-year old state law on financial literacy. This month CDE is issuing an RFP to distribute funds to qualified districts, Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), and charter schools to implement a financial literacy curriculum. With a small (\$30,000) appropriation, qualified applicants will receive a maximum of \$5,000 each to support their programs next year. It is encouraging to see this and several other state, local, and industry-sponsored financial literacy programs around the state: Colorado Council on Economic Education, Jump Start Coalition, Independent Bankers of Colorado.

In addition, I chair a commission on financial education of the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE). We are tracking successful financial literacy models in the states (Utah, Kansas), including an annual survey to better understand how well students are learning about their finances, and teaching financial education as early as elementary school.

#### After-school

Another element of lifelong learning occurs in the after-school hours. Quality after-school programs enhance student learning, prevent delinquency and crime, and provide support for working families. Good after-school programs, such as tutoring, recreational activities, and group projects, can expand interest in school. One of our state's after-school programs, the Tony Grampsas Youth Services Program, received a one-time restoration in state funds in this year's budget. An additional proposal to add \$4 million in state funds to target after-school programs to poor students, however, failed late in the session.

#### College Access

An important component of lifelong learning is higher education. Using Referendum C money, the legislature passed funding increases for colleges this year for unfunded students. School districts here in Adams County and throughout the state offer classes and curricula that emphasize post secondary education. There is also the need for more college counselors as they have had high ratios of students that they're responsible for. Colorado's college outreach programs are designed to support post secondary access.

Not all students want or need college or community college, however, and this reality again underscores the importance of career education efforts. In fact, many of us are quite concerned that the state's higher education requirements, especially for math and foreign language, are deterring students from school because they are crowding out other important content areas that keep many students interested in learning, such as social studies, art, music, and physical education. Students learn in different ways and it's important to respect choice in the public schools.

#### NEW AMERICA SCHOOL (NAS)

A public education demand that my foundation has successfully met is educating migrant youth with low levels of English language skills. Some of you are familiar with the New America School, as one of the campuses is in Thornton. Our principal, Paulette Schroeder, is here with us today.

Several years ago, we were astounded to find the void in education for older youth in the Denver area who spoke very little English. Some school districts with high populations of these youngsters were re-prioritizing away from serving these students because of their increased focuses on CSAP tests. In 2003, we reached out to the Aurora Public Schools, Adams 14, and the Denver Public Schools to persuade them to open a charter school with this focus. This led to the founding of the New America School. Three years later, we have campuses in Thornton and at Lowry, with another to open next fall in Jefferson County.

#### NAS Facts

Through a project-based curriculum, NAS students gain English proficiency and can earn a high school diploma. The school's first campus in Aurora opened its doors two years ago with 125 students and enrollment at the Thornton campus increased from 76 to 240 students in less than one year.

A quarter of the Thornton students are prior dropouts and none of those students dropped out this school year. Daily attendance is 86%, which is high considering that many students work and have family obligations, and many have dropped out from other schools. The school has had no suspensions or expulsions for fighting during the current school year.

The school's success results from targeted recruitment efforts, small class sizes, a supportive environment, student services, and a strong emphasis on curriculum and instruction. The NAS actively recruits students who are not enrolled in or have dropped out of high school. Administrators and staff participate in numerous community events that attract a large number of immigrants and youth in attendance, such as fairs and parades, and recruit those older students who have given up on their education. NAS also offers small classes to support an effective English language and content program. To better accommodate students' non-traditional schedules due to work and family obligations, the school has day and night schedule choices (8:30am-9:30pm) and is also open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturdays.

#### ACADEMY OF URBAN LEARNING

Before I wrap up, I just want to mention another school that my foundation started this year in Denver – the Academy of Urban Learning (AUL), which educates homeless and highly transient youth. This year the school educated more than 40 students who have struggled with homelessness, unstable living situations or other at-risk factors. The school focuses on personalized learning, and each student has strong one-on-one working relationships with fellow classmates and the school's five teachers. AUL partners with Urban Peak for comprehensive services, the Community College of Denver and the nearby Emily Griffith Opportunity School so that every student can take at least one postsecondary course before graduating. AUL faculty holds each student to high expectations through quarterly portfolios and a rigorous academic program. The school provides an onsite counselor who works with students daily in search of internships, jobs, and housing opportunities.

#### Conclusion

To close, I sincerely thank you for your efforts at supporting a meaningful education for the youth of Adams County. I know how hard you work, and you are making a noticeable difference. Thank you again for this opportunity to speak to you today. I am happy to take any questions.

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

May 17, 2006

15 minutes to speak (7:30-7:45 a.m.) and some time for questions

About 50-60 attendees: Officials from Adams County school districts (Westminster, Mapleton, Adams 12, Adams 14, Brighton), Adams County workforce and economic development agencies, and businesspeople in Adams County.

#### ACEC Activities

The Adams County Education Consortium includes all five school district superintendents, four community colleges, the county workforce department, and core businesses in the county. The consortium director, Sandy Steiner, said that the consortium has a disconnect with state education initiatives and policies.

The consortium's initiatives focus on how to help students and teachers throughout the county understand jobs, workplaces, business practices, and to develop real relationships with employers. The consortium grew out of county businesses dissatisfaction with job applicants, and school districts unhappiness with their high school graduation rates.

Their initiatives include linking middle schoolers with businesses to gain a real sense of how to develop a path to their employment goals; facilitating teacher visits to workplaces to help them guide students in the classroom on important skills and to help them counsel students better for work goals; and partnering with the Daniels Fund to develop school curricula on economic development, financial education, and entrepreneurship.