

Colorado Coalition for the Homeless
Keynote Address - May 17, 2006
by Jared Polis

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for having me speak to you today. It is a great honor for me to address you – a group that reaches out to support the people who need it the most.

What I will try to add to your conversation today is a state perspective that offers a message of hope for our next generation. As a statewide policymaker who cares about a government that provides resources for those that lack them, I have focused on improving public education for all children. Empowering young children and their families is a critical part of building a society where people who can support themselves, and continue to help others learn and thrive. It is a field filled with optimism because children are inherently optimistic and quality education has a long-term impact. Being able to support children and help them understand that they can succeed in life is a great thing.

I have learned about the different levels on which each of us can contribute to a more supportive, fairer place to live. These levels include direct services, political action, and policy advocacy.

During my 5½ years on the Colorado State Board of Education, I have fought for increased educational access for all students. And students learn in different ways, come from many different backgrounds, and have a variety of interests. To ensure that all children get a meaningful education, there are a number of different approaches, which I'll share with you today.

General Outline

First, I'd like to talk to you about an exciting new school that I founded for homeless and highly transient youth that is just completing its first year.

I will then step back the discussion to talk about key state policy initiatives that I have been advocating to support young people.

Finally, I'll present perspective on affecting the political balance of powers to make meaningful change.

What I invite you to consider today is that you can make a difference, in many different ways.

Extent of Homelessness

Just over a week ago, the Denver Metro Homeless Initiative study found a moderate 4% drop in the number of homeless people in the Denver, and an 11.5% drop in the Denver area. A look beyond that number, however, reveals that we still face multiple challenges in providing a safe shelter for all people.

The study found:

- There are over 9000 homeless people in the Denver metro area
- A third of homeless people are age 19 and younger
- Both urban and rural homelessness is prevalent
- Homeless families are increasing
- Job loss is the cause of 40% of homeless people
- There are lots of reasons for homelessness: disabilities, low wages, high expenses, lack of affordable housing, health care costs,
- Denver area drops in homelessness last year related to improved availability of resources, coordination, and outreach
- 20% of the homeless population are homeless for the first time – meaning we have a lot of work to do

As you know, there is difficulty in understanding the extent of homelessness for a range of reasons: some people don't use homeless resources, some have language barriers, some are afraid or embarrassed to come forward, some have disabilities, some have criminal justice fears. In fact, one estimate I have heard is that we have closer to 15,000 homeless people in the Denver area, about 40% more than what is reported.

EDUCATING HOMELESS YOUTH

With so many underserved children in this state, policymakers and civic leaders have a responsibility to find out how to provide education services to them. To address this goal from a philanthropic angle, my foundation, the Jared Polis Foundation, established two schools in the past several years. One school, the Academy of Urban Learning, is specifically targeted to educating homeless and highly transient youth. Our other school, the New America School, which will open its third campus in the Denver area next year, focuses on older youth (ages 16-20) who are usually from migrant families, and are English language learners. I will talk about this school in a few minutes.

Academy of Urban Learning

Key factors in opening AUL:

- It's critical to reach out to disenfranchised homeless youth because all children deserve and have a right to education.
- Education is a long-term, intergenerational way for people to escape poverty
- In a world where young people and families have to balance shelter, health care, employment, and food needs with education, learning opportunities sometimes takes a back seat.
- Many youth have problems with substance abuse, crime, and other societal pressures
- AUL and NAS address challenges of both urban and rural homelessness

I know that the federal McKinney-Vento Act requires that homeless students not be segregated just because they are homeless. This is not the situation with the AUL, however, because the school is an education resource to students who would otherwise not be in school at all because of homelessness, unstable living conditions, or personal issues.

In opening AUL, we recognized the necessity of partnering with Urban Peak, which is such a strong community-based organization and has helped provide comprehensive resources to our students.

Facts about the Academy of Urban Learning

This year the Academy of Urban Learning (AUL), educated more than 40 students who have struggled with issues of 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 also partners with the Community College of Denver and the nearby Emily Griffith

Opportunity School so that every student can take a minimum of one postsecondary course before graduating. AUL faculty holds each student to high expectations through quarterly portfolios and a rigorous academic program focused on core subjects. Also, through the partnership with Urban Peak, a nonprofit offering a full array of supportive services for high-risk youth, students receive intensive and comprehensive services while enrolled at AUL. The school provides an onsite counselor who works with students daily in search of internships, jobs, and housing opportunities.

As our principal, Mark Koester has said, these 40 students would not be going to high school if it weren't for AUL. Many of the students had previously dropped out of high school and are in unstable living conditions. The dedicated faculty treat each student as a unique individual. The staff and students have helped to create a safe environment for learning. 5-10 AUL students were enrolled in post-secondary courses this year.

*(I'd like to recognize Mark Koester, who is here with us today, for his excellent leadership of our school. Some of you will hear Mark later today at a breakout session.)

Differentiated Instruction at AUL

AUL students have reported that they like the school because it is small, which helps prevent cliques and allows them to focus on challenging school work. The school provides academic skills in all content areas, engaging students in relevant and usable areas including debate, philosophy, and politics. A key in academic component at AUL is differentiated instruction, meaning matching student learning opportunities to their learning needs. This is a public policy philosophy that works throughout the educational system.

Some of our students have very high academic skills, but are truant and have multiple challenges. Other AUL students have low academic skill levels, and we need to provide them with instruction that is appropriately challenging. We have had successes with hands-on learning experience because many of our students learning by seeing and hearing, so we go beyond just lecturing. What our staff have found that is that in addition to the regular challenges of learning, our students also have to unlearn previous negative school experiences. All AUL students who have consistent attendance are progressing through grade levels at the school, and 4 or 5 will graduate this spring.

Comprehensive Services at AUL

Because of the challenges that our students face, it is essential that the school enhances academic achievement through other kinds of tangible community supports. Typical barriers of AUL students include:

- Food availability
- Transportation
- Employment
- Substance abuse

Because of socio-economic challenges that are especially unique to AUL students, our school needs to increase its community collaboration and involvement in the following areas:

- Resources to help students obtain their birth certificates, a key document in job searches
- Resources for driver's permits and licenses to facilitate transportation
- Emergency resources for clinic visits and medicine
- Guardian Ad Litem, to help access medical care, legal standing, and other rights
- Mentors and tutors
- Assistance with taxes

Anecdotes

One pregnant student used to do drugs on the street. This year at AUL, she hasn't missed one day of school (except while at work or at the doctor's office). She is also an Americorps member, and will be graduating this spring. The school gave her a surprise baby shower the other day. This is an example of the intergenerational support that AUL provides.

One young man came to AUL after living with gangs, doing drugs, and eventually crashing his car, causing him to lose a finger and scar his face. After this life threatening situation, he enrolled at AUL and is now one of the school's most positive leaders

You can do it

My experience with AUL shows that what could be considered a dream can be reality. In developing the school, my staff and I coordinated with Urban Peak, which offers such supportive wraparound services including housing assistance, employment counseling, case management, health services, and a GED lab. We then we opened up a dialogue with the leaders and decision-makers of the Denver Public Schools. The district recognized the need that AUL could fill and agreed to the school as a charter school. It again showed me that where there is a will, there's a way.

New America School (NAS)

The foundation has addressed another underserved population – migrant youth with low levels of English language skills. 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 School District in Commerce City, 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 provides outreach to migrant students who are often homeless, but not identified as such because:

- They don't speak much if any English and so are detached from public education
- They are afraid to come forward to request education because they are worried that they'll be deported
- They often live in remote areas far from a physical school building
- They work during typical school hours

NAS Facts

Through a project-based curriculum, NAS students gain English proficiency and can earn a high school diploma. As a charter school designed to accommodate the educational needs of recently arrived immigrants, NAS is the first of its kind in Colorado. 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 students to 240 students in less than one year. The school offers an academic focus, and extracurricular activities that encourage personal growth, leadership, and social skills necessary for students' success.

The NAS emphasizes dropout prevention, multi-cultural education, and self-esteem building. A quarter of the Thornton students are prior dropouts and none of those students dropped out in the current 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.

This success results from targeted recruitment efforts, small class sizes, a supportive environment, robust student services, and a strong emphasis on curriculum and instruction. 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.

The school is also committed to excellent teaching through professional development and a shared leadership environment. NAS partners with the University of Colorado at Denver for free training in teachers' classrooms with education coaches from the university's ESL. The Thornton campus retained 70% of its faculty and staff in its second year.

As schools seek ways to address the growing achievement gaps among students from different socioeconomic, racial and ethnic backgrounds, high dropout rates, and poor educational outcomes of English language learners, NAS is an encouraging example of educational innovation. It has provided educational opportunity to students facing multiple barriers, which strengthens our education system.

POLICY ADVOCACY

Education initiatives

In addition to our philanthropic work of creating two new schools to address unique learning needs, I have also led education policy advancements. These policy advancements include state legislation, ballot initiatives and referenda, and rules of the State Board of Education. As state board chairman two years ago, I helped develop and advocate for a set of the board's legislative priorities, which I'll cover in a few minutes. I

was also asked to co-chair the state commission on high school improvement, and was heavily involved in setting rules and policy priorities for the state's efforts to close the achievement gaps.

State Board of Education Responsibilities

The State Board of Education is an eight-member board that supervises the state's education system. Specific responsibilities include:

- Hiring and supervising an education commissioner to run the Colorado Department of Education
- Approve education rules to implement laws enacted by the legislature and Congress
- Enforce state standards through school district accreditation
- Approve teacher licenses, teacher preparation programs, and teacher training programs
- Hear and rule on charter school appeals after denials by local school districts

Choice and Alternatives

To keep kids in school, it is critical that our public education system meets diverse student learning needs and interests, and public policies that encourage public school choice have been helpful. I support district schools, charter schools, online schools, and alternative schools that offer specific innovative educational programs, especially for at-risk students.

Some districts, such as the Mapleton School District in Adams County, have taken bold steps to differentiate learning to meet various student needs. This district recently broke down its large high school into six smaller high schools, each with a particular focus, including college and career preparation, experiential learning, technology, arts, core knowledge, and personalized learning. Another district, Delta County, brought private schools and home schools into the public system, when they agreed to accountability measures, such as the CSAP, and then gained access to public funding. And local districts throughout the state have succeeded with their own alternative schools aimed at students who are at-risk of dropping out.

Outside of district-run efforts are charter schools and online schools. State Board of Education members regularly arbitrate disputes between local districts and charter school applicants, and I often support promising charter schools that meet particular learning needs that the district is not addressing. Online schools are another approach to supporting learning for especially at-risk students. Some students who fall behind, or who have delinquency, social or family challenges prefer to learn via the computer. Colorado is lucky to have several schools that offer a high quality online education. Unfortunately, state statute restricts funding to students in online schools by requiring them to attend physical public schools first. This cost-saving provision of state law is clearly unconstitutional in my view, because it discriminates against students in non-public schools whose families think they'd do better in an online environment. The Colorado Constitution requires that all children have access to a thorough and uniform education. This year, a bill to open up access to online schools was narrowly defeated in the House Education Committee, despite my testimony in support of the bill.

Education choice is a primary reason for concern about recent statewide college admission standards that have been dictated to us by the Colorado Commission on Higher Education. These standards ignore the fact that students learn differently because they impose overly rigorous math and foreign language requirements. Already we've seen the negative effects of these requirements as school districts are eliminating or reducing art, music, P.E., social studies and health classes, and are struggling to find qualified teachers for the high-level math and foreign language classes. We will continue to work with the Colorado arts education community and the rural schools caucus to find alternatives to these onerous requirements, so all content standards are supported.

It's important to keep the public discourse going on these critical issues through the state high school improvement commission recommendations, sessions at education conferences, and in legislative proposals.

Closing the Achievement Gaps

It is critical that Colorado close achievement gaps between poor and non-poor students and between white and non-white students. Across all grade levels and subjects, white and wealthier students consistently score 30-40% higher on the CSAP and graduate more frequently. Our state Closing the Achievement Gap commission and coalition have examined research on what works and have proposed a wide range of effective solutions:

- Fair accountability
- Good school and district leadership
- Data-driven instruction
- Good professional development for teachers
- Strong parental, community, and business involvement
- Early childhood education
- Increased funding

This year, the State Board of Education finally passed rules for a three-year old law that requires our department to identify schools with the largest gaps and offer them technical assistance to help close achievement gaps. We also advocated unsuccessfully for state funding to aid this effort, and will try again next year.

Funding

To accomplish any education improvement requires general and specific funding. Six years ago, Colorado voters passed Amendment 23, which requires annual state funding increases for K-12 education. I strongly supported this ballot measure and last year's Referendum C, which gave the state the flexibility to spend the revenues that the state receives. Another key effort has been to maximize state revenues of trust lands, proceeds of which also go to schools. After several years of making gains in this area, the legislature this year defeated a broad-based land trust reform bill. We will again work with lawmakers next year to help them realize the valuable potential of this trust for our state's students.

Lifelong Learning

Research consistently shows that one of the most effective supports to K-12 success is comprehensive lifelong learning, including preschool, family literacy, after-school programs, and access to higher education. Some have recently termed this concept P-16, or preschool through college. Both the high school improvement commission and closing the achievement gap reports recommended this approach, which eases student transitions across grade levels. The State Board of Education has also prioritized these services in its legislative agenda.

- Early childhood education – Dramatic research findings on quality early education should prompt all policymakers to strongly support these programs. Benefits of good preschool range from stronger academic success to economic success to crime reduction, each with profound cost savings. Specifically found are better test scores, 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 slots 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. Colorado, for the first time, appropriated \$200,000 for family literacy through the budget process.

- After-school – One of our state's after-school programs received a one-time boost in state funds in this year's state budget. An additional proposal to add \$4 million in state funds to target after-school programs to poor students failed late in the session.

- Higher education opportunities – The promise of higher education, in either a 2-year or 4-year college, is a major way to help kids stay engaged in school. Unfortunately, funding is a significant hindrance to postsecondary access. Over the past year, both the State Board of Education and the legislature proposed authorizing dual enrollment programs that allow high school students to gain college credit as they're also gaining credit to graduate from high school. Both efforts failed even though existing programs have been

extremely successful in some Denver-area schools at helping poor students gain higher education access for the first time.

Health care initiatives

In an effort to support all individuals' abilities to achieve self-sufficiency, important legislation this year sought to improve access to health care, especially for disadvantaged people. The high cost of health care threatens people's lives, including children and their families. An editorial last month summarized the progressive legislation, which is now waiting action by the governor.

These bills include:

- Funding (\$15 million/year) for health care for uninsured, low-income people through health centers.
- Cost Information that would help consumers to make informed decisions about their care.
- Avoiding infections at hospitals by promoting better sanitary practices and saving millions of dollars.
- Nutritious school vending machine choices. Despite the governor's veto of this bill, awareness has been raised to the point where the soda industry is pulling out of most schools.

POLITICAL ADVOCACY

The last aspect of my role in supporting less fortunate people is through the macro strategies of politics. In politics you have to take sides. I am a Democrat and while I work closely with policymakers from both parties, I stand with Democrats because I have found them to be more compassionate toward people with fewer resources, particularly in the areas of public education and health care that I just mentioned.

In 2004, I worked hard to change the majority of the state legislature, because for the previous 40 plus years under Republican leadership, lawmakers refused to advance measures to help this state fund important programs. A huge part of the problem has been TABOR (Taxpayers Bill of Rights), which has damaged this state in many ways by preventing state and local governments from spending their collected revenues on important services – education, higher education, health care, housing, family and social services, and transportation. TABOR allows voters to set aside these restrictive limits, but the previous majority refused to let voters decide to do so.

Voters across the state decided two years ago to change the majority party that had controlled state spending priorities and bring in a party with a different message: government exists to meet people's needs. Very few people predicted that could happen, but it did. Last year, the new legislative majority passed Referendum C, which was approved by the voters to relax TABOR's restrictive limits and restore education, health care, and higher education programs that had been slashed for years.

Referendum C helped fund:

- Special education
- Gifted and talented students
- Quality school principals
- Lower prescription-drug prices
- Early intervention for more than 600 infants and toddlers with developmental disabilities

All members of the state House of Representatives and half of the state Senate are up for re-election this year. Political advocacy, however, doesn't end there. As you probably know, Governor Owens, after 8 years of service, is out of office next year because of term limits. So, the open governor seat is on this year's ballot as well, as are 3 of the 8 members of the State Board of Education and several Colorado University Regent seats. At the local levels, county commissioners, county-wide offices, and city council seats are up this fall, and all members of the U.S. House of Representatives are up for re-election this year, including the 7 Colorado representatives. You will also likely see a number of important ballot initiatives and referenda this year, including proposals that affect poor and disenfranchised people – on immigration, education, and gay rights. Whatever level or levels you get involved in, you can make a positive difference, and I encourage you

to participate.

Conclusion

Whether you provide direct services, volunteer at a community level, promote state or local policy, or engage in political movements, each of you can make a difference in improving other people's lives. We are all in this together. If one person goes hungry or homeless, it hurts all of us. If one child fails to have a quality education, it hurts the rest of us. I have learned that we can all contribute even if the system seems like it's stacked against us. This is the message of hope – a message that will make our world more just, more fair, more caring, and better for all of us.

Thank you again.