

June 30, 2007

"IT'S A NEW DAY"

- Commissioner Dwight D. Jones

1. My First 30 Days

To say these weeks have been a whirl with activity is much like suggesting that a downpour contains a little moisture! This has been a time of great change and a great time of change, and I am grateful to the staff, the deputy commissioner and the out-going commissioner for helping to make my transition as smooth as possible. Their input has proven invaluable. As I begin to meet with staff throughout the department, I continue to be impressed with their dedication and depth of knowledge. Colorado certainly can be proud of the expertise these folks bring to the table.

Meetings with representatives of the House and Senate (both parties) have been very optimistic, as have conversations I've had with members of the governor's office and with leadership of CASB, CASE and CEA. I am encouraged, too, by the state board's continued, undivided and enthusiastic support. I have met with board members during the past few weeks, learning more about their vision for the department and for education in Colorado.

One of the leaders I met with captured the overall gist quite well, and I paraphrase: "We have been given a window of opportunity for change, and that window is now. The commitment for public education to do better and move forward is alive and well. There is excitement about the very real possibility to actually make some change."

2. What I Consider "Non-Negotiables"

Commentators, theorists, trend watchers and others have suggested that in 10 years, the educational system as we know it will not exist. Whether they tout this idea to incite reaction or are truly concerned about the future, I do not believe we have anything to fear. Certainly the world of education is changing, yet I am convinced we will thrive come what may if we remain committed to what I consider "non-negotiables":

- Narrowing and eliminating the achievement gap for all students
- A strong focus on literacy
- Ensuring all children quality instruction
- Continued emphasis on high standards and rigor
- Graduating college-ready (or workforce-ready) high school students

Using these five criteria as the lens through which we view everything – from curriculum to policy, standards to assessments – will keep us on track. Student achievement will measure our success. I am supportive of CSAP; I believe it is an effective tool with which to monitor student progress. I also believe it needs continual evaluation to ensure its efficacy. As educational standards are reviewed and revised, it is imperative that CSAP changes with the standards as to truly align with what kids must know and be able to do.

Other areas requiring immediate attention and action include:

- The integrity of online education
- School funding
- Early childhood programs
- P-20 and working to create a viable partnership between K-12 and higher education

Personally, I want to gain a better understanding of school choice and hear the viewpoints of folks on both sides of the aisle. I also intend to learn more about the issues with which rural districts struggle, and find ways to best assist them and the students they serve. As we focus on reform, however, we mustn't lose sight of the critical factor we would be lost without – focused instruction. Teacher quality, training and continued development must remain a priority if we are to achieve the governor's Colorado Promise regarding education.

Districts and schools across Colorado are doing many positive things to individualize instruction, excite kids about learning and reach out to the students at risk of falling through the cracks. I am eager to “get settled” this summer so that I may begin visiting school districts – especially those in rural areas – in the fall. And yes, I do indeed plan on traveling to all 178 over the next two years. As I told staff in a previous memo I also say to you, I want to hear what you have to say. You can be confident that I am listening.

Commissioner of Education Dwight D. Jones is a champion of public education. He firmly believes that all children can learn regardless of ethnicity or socio-economic background, and he has proved it. His leadership and effort in Fountain-Fort Carson School District Eight resulted in dramatically reducing the achievement gap across that district. Dwight shares his passion for education with his wife, Jenifer, an administrator in Academy District 20. Three children – Alexandra (17), Dallas (14) and Landry (4) – round out their family.

cc: Gov. Ritter, the State House, the State Senate, SBE, Superintendents, CDE, BOCES, CASB, CASE, CEA, CFT and David Skaggs.