



Colorado Department of Education
William J. Moloney, Commissioner



"This place is not easy to manage."

- *Roy Romer, Superintendent*
- *Los Angeles Unified School District*

October 21, 2003

I. CCHE RAISES REQUIREMENTS FOR COLLEGE ADMISSION

This age of standards continues to spread its influence across the entire face of American education.

A recent example of this trend was the decision by the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) to raise admission requirements for all high school students aspiring to attend the state's four-year institutions.

Current eighth graders will be the first affected by these changes, which will be completely phased in by 2010. Most notable among the eighteen credits of required core curriculum are four years of math (Algebra I and above) and the two years of foreign language.

Understandably, many questions about these changes are being asked as awareness of them spreads through the K-12 community.

Will all students aiming for four-year schools be able to meet these higher standards? Will districts be able to find enough individuals qualified to teach, particularly in the math, science, and foreign language areas?

A most important question being widely asked is whether these tougher requirements might cause problems of equity and access, particularly, among those less advantaged populations already underrepresented in higher education.

Before suggesting some answers to these questions, it is important to know the real reasons why these admission requirements were raised.

Many say they were raised simply because too many students were showing up in colleges unprepared to do college work and, therefore, having to take a lot of remedial courses instead.

Actually, the main reason Colorado and 37 other states are raising admission standards is to correct a situation they themselves created when they lowered standards more than a generation ago.

Many may remember the notoriety attained by the well-regarded City College of New York when they announced that, henceforth, any applicant with a high school diploma would be admitted. What some saw as an odd New York moment soon became an unofficial nationwide trend eventually resulting in 85% of American colleges and universities having de facto "open admissions."

Prior to these developments, high school principals likewise could insist on rigorous core curriculum simply by saying, "if you don't, you won't get into college." Both parents and students understood this.

When this lever was taken away from high schools, we were on a slippery slope, because we always understood the interdependence of high school and college requirements. If colleges lowered admission requirements, it was inevitable that high school graduation requirements – the obverse of the same coin of standards – would suffer.

Foreign language was a good example of this "interconnectedness." When colleges routinely required two or even three years of foreign language for admission, high school language departments thrived. With the rapid elimination of that requirement by the colleges, high school foreign language enrollment by 1980 had fallen to 35% of its 1960 level.

More than anyone, it is elected officials who have "called the question" on these matters as they wondered why students spent so much more time in college – the traditional "four-year degree" now takes closer to six – and what lay behind the exponential growth of remediation.

Former California Governor Pete Wilson might have been speaking for all of them when he plaintively asked, "If they can't do college work, what are they doing in college?"

Similar questions have been pointedly asked in recent days by an Interim Committee of the Colorado General Assembly examining state expenditures and ways to control them in this time of economic hardship.

So much for history! Now what is to be done to deal with all of this? How will we find the answers to those pertinent questions raised earlier in this essay?

It is relatively easy to pass new requirements. It is a much more complicated task to control their consequences. The certain consequences that lie ahead for both K-12 and post-secondary education can't be wholly foreseen, but whether those consequences bring more good than bad will turn on the skill of the people who will shape and direct the implementation of all this.

Conversations among the State Board of Education, our leading education organizations, and many individual superintendents, make one thing clear – the K-12 community wants to lead this implementation.

In the near future, this matter will be the subject of a teleconference involving among others, CASE Executive Director Bob Tschirki, the heads of the five regional superintendents organizations, and key CDE personnel.

The same period will see the first meeting of the newly appointed Governor's Commission on Closing the Achievement Gap which will view these matters as a most important item of its agenda. Serving on that commission are two superintendents – Dwight Jones of Fountain-Fort Carson and Monte Moses of Cherry Creek.

II. AT THE HEART OF THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

As the above discussions of college admissions again remind us, the broadest and deepest issue in all of American education involves student achievement in general, and the achievement gap in particular.

The achievement gap compels our commitment because it is a challenge that goes to the very core of what kind of society we are and what kind of country we will be in the future.

Of all the differing groups of children suffering the burdens of this gap – poverty, mobility, discrimination, etc. – we must have a particular concern for those who must also climb the frequently steep hill of English language acquisition.

In Colorado, there are currently identified some 90,000 youngsters in that category. The good news is that we are finding increasingly compelling evidence that given the right instructional programs and support systems, these youngsters can advance rapidly toward English language fluency.

As evidenced by a recently awarded \$9.2 million dollar federal grant – the only one of its kind in the country – CDE’s English Language Acquisition Unit – has gained a reputation as a national leader in these endeavors.

A vital key to success is the training not only of teachers in the field, but also trainers of trainers and, most importantly, instructors in our colleges.

Under the leadership of Unit Director Flora Camejos-Lenhardt and her Assistant Lynda Franco, CDE has provided formal training to nearly 2,000 individuals. This effort, fully utilizing the new federal funds and involving all sixteen of our teacher training institutions, is the most sought after professional development program CDE has ever offered.

At present, it is reaching almost all parts of our state. If this is something that could be of help in your district, and you would like more information about professional development opportunities for teachers, or other aspects of the ELA program, call (303-866-6963), write (Flo Lenhardt, ELA Unit, 201 East Colfax Avenue, Denver, CO 80203), or e-mail (hayes_r@cde.state.co.us).

For some further insight into the enormous national implications of this cause, see the enclosed op-ed piece I did for the Denver Post and Rocky Mountain News (http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/opinion/article/0,1299,DRMN_38_2317651,00.html) of October 4th, which was occasioned by a visit to former Colorado Governor Roy Romer to learn of the remarkable things his leadership as superintendent has brought to Los Angeles.

Sincerely yours,

William J. Moloney
Commissioner of Education

cc: Governor Owens, General Assembly, State Board of Education, CDE Cabinet, CDE Staff, BOCES, CASB, CASE, CEA, and CFT

Rocky Mountain News

To print this page, select **File** then **Print** from your browser

URL: http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/opinion/article/0,1299,DRMN_38_2317651,00.html

Speakout: Romer succeeding admirably at L.A. schools

By William J. Moloney, Special to the News
October 5, 2003

Recently I met with Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent Roy Romer to discuss what is arguably the most important and hopeful story in all of American education and one with immense implications for Colorado.

"This place is not easy to manage," said Romer in an understated reference to the sprawling urban district - the country's second largest, with more pupils than all of Colorado.

Romer's difficulties stem not just from numbers but rather the special challenges around English language acquisition faced by the 75 percent of his students who are Latino.

The future of these children, and of California, will turn on whether these youngsters gain fluency in the language that is the indispensable passport to full participation in American society.

If the system fails these children - thereby condemning them to permanent second-class citizenship - we shall dangerously undermine a fundamental principle of our democracy, namely that everyone has an equal opportunity to advance.

If, however, they succeed, we may see the glorious prospect of a new age of renewal in which America proves that the melting pot still works and the words of hope inscribed on the Statue of Liberty are still true.

The very good news is that the children of Los Angeles are providing strong evidence that the more hopeful scenario will prevail.

In the last three years, reading and math scores in grades 2-5 have increased at a rate twice the state average. Middle and high school results also exceeded the rate of state gains.

For decades, Los Angeles - like other big cities around the nation - has been an anchor dragging state averages down. Now it is an engine driving state achievement upward.

What explains this remarkable transformation?

"It is due," said Romer in a recent report to his board, "to very focused instruction, a strong curriculum, effective teacher training, coaching, and the use of periodic assessments."

What is this "focused instruction" and "strong curriculum"?

In reading, it is phonetically based, direct instruction stressing comprehension. In math, the methodology is also highly structured and clearly focused.

As a visitor, I was struck by the high level of consistency from school to school and classroom to classroom. Particularly impressive were the student writing samples, the more remarkable in that the English language was still relatively new to so many of these children.

Drill and practice - still anathema in some quarters - held no terrors for these youngsters as they clamored for an opportunity to recite. Particularly popular, a literacy coach explained, are the fluency drills wherein each child is equipped with an egg timer to pace their reading aloud to seatmates.

Why, one might ask, has this heartening and vitally important story not gotten wider attention? Why have these striking achievement gains gone uncelebrated in local and national media?

The answer to these questions is complex.

For some, these instructional methods remain "educationally incorrect" while others simply can't be comfortable with the English-dominant approach. Still others just can't believe that anything positive ever comes from big cities.

Yet, if you talk to parents from these schools - many newly arrived in America - you find great enthusiasm for both methods and results. The reason is simple: They see a future of promise for their children. For immigrants, this has always been at the heart of the American dream.

In the view of staff and parents, very large credit for these successes goes to Romer himself. The clarity of his vision, the strength of his leadership and his great sense of urgency are seen as indispensable elements in this turnaround.

As a former member of his cabinet, I well remember the sheer drive that wore out staff members half his age. During this visit, much was familiar, including tables cluttered with graphs, charts and data that the occupant pushed at his visitor along with rapid-fire explanations. The well-remembered restless energy, probing curiosity and strong sense of mission seemed undiminished in his 75th year. The work Roy Romer is doing today may well be his greatest legacy. All Americans should wish him well. The stakes are huge.

William J. Moloney is the Colorado commissioner of education and chairman of the board for the Education Leaders Council.

Copyright 2003, Rocky Mountain News. All Rights Reserved.