



**For Immediate Release:**

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**State Board of Education Holds the Line on Standards:  
All 8th Graders to Master Algebra I**

**(Oakland, CA)** - The State Board of Education courageously voted today to hold the line on Algebra I as the 8th grade math standard in a motion by Board Member Greg Jones. In an 8 to 1 vote, the Board turned down the proposed California Department of Education's Math Blueprint. This is an historic win for California students. California has a rich history of trend-setting. Today we continue to lead the nation as an example of what it means to set the bar high and truly push for rigor and educational excellence.

**Below, please find today's testimony by Russlynn Ali, Executive Director of the Education Trust—West before the State Board of Education in support of today's board action:**

President Mitchell, State Chief O'Connell and Members of the Board:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon. Let me say in advance that we appreciate the difficulty and complexity of the decision before you today. Deciding the standards and skills our students need to master at the critical juncture between middle and high school is among the most important decision any board of education will ever make. And the decision to hold ourselves accountable for getting students to those standards is among the most courageous steps any board could take.

There is no doubt tempers are flared today. Sides are drawn and rhetoric is heated. What started as a thoughtful process by the California Department of Education to figure out how to reconcile our state's good standards with the demand of NCLB to actually get students to those standards seems to have devolved into finger pointing and partisan bickering. There are extremes. You've read about them in the press and blogosphere.

One extreme is basically content with just bludgeoning schools into doing more and arguing that anyone on the other side simply doesn't care or worse, is racist. On the other extreme are folks who, frankly, always find a reason why doing the right thing must be postponed—why the task should be made easier for the adults especially, but for kids, too. Because, as the theory goes, schools are doing the best they can with the kids they've got.

In my few minutes with you today, I hope to cut through some of this noise and tension. Because this debate is not as simple as some would have you believe. Neither “side” is right, and rationality lies somewhere in the middle. You must pierce through this debate—powered by the knowledge of what is right for California’s students and the knowledge that when we really stretch to teach students more than ever before, we actually get it done.

Trust me, I and my colleagues have seen first hand the kind of progress for students that is possible when everybody—policymakers, teachers, administrators and students themselves—truly focus on doing whatever it takes to get all students to high standards. Setting and maintaining high standards is not enough, though. Because as state policymakers you must make sure that teachers and students have the materials and supports they need to reach them.

So what is the issue really about? In some ways, this is about getting caught. For a long time, state leaders, including members of this Board have waxed eloquent about how Algebra was the math standard in the 8th grade. Yet for federal accountability purposes we counted the General Math test the same as Algebra I. And now we’ve been called on it—forcing us to be really transparent about whether the standards we’re so proud of are for all young Californians, or just some.

Thus, at its core, today is about four critical issues: 1) Deciding what our middle school standards are, and being transparent about that. (2) Measuring school progress on whether all students are meeting those standards—all of them; (3) Making sure that students and the educators charged with teaching them have the supports and materials they need. And, (4) Holding ourselves accountable for the results.

The department’s blueprint represented a thoughtful attempt to remedy some of the debate by developing a test that is aligned to many of the Algebra I standards, but not all. Therein lies the rub, and why you should vote “no” to the department’s blueprint. If Algebra—the full complement of Algebra—is our 8th grade standard, we must measure and hold ourselves accountable to that standard. Assessing students on the less advanced concepts of Algebra is simply not the same as assessing them on all of Algebra. And so, measuring students on the “some-of-Algebra” assessment should not be considered measuring on grade level standard for federal, or state, accountability purposes.

All this said, your compliance agreement must not be an empty promise. We must have adequate resources to provide both teachers and students with the supports they need to make quick improvements. To say go ahead anyway, if those resources are not in hand, is to risk losing the fragile momentum we have made in raising the bar throughout schools across the state. Because despite all the progress—vastly more students of every group enrolled in Algebra earlier—assessment results still show that performance is weak. Students are getting the course, and that’s great news, but by and large the Algebra class is either terribly watered down or they aren’t learning the material. To do more of the same is not only defending a status quo that isn’t working, but it fails to recognize the very real challenges facing students and their teachers every day.

Our Algebra challenge is daunting indeed. But the problem is not that middle school students aren’t developmentally capable of learning Algebra. To the contrary, new research is clear: in most other countries, students in the middle grades are learning

Algebra and Geometry, while in the US and California our students are still learning arithmetic. The problem is that too many of our teachers don't have a strong grounding in mathematics, and too few of our teachers get the curricular support and coaching they need. The same, sadly, is true of struggling students.

We should solve this problem by doing what the research suggests: the more explicit the intervention and the more careful its implementation, the more likely we are to improve results. We've as yet done precious little to ensure that schools get the right sort of help. You know, as well as I do, that without the pressure of accountability, our standards will continue to be implemented at a scandalously sluggish pace. But you also know that it is hard to move fast when educators and students don't have well designed supports.

Today represents a real opportunity to combine the two. Today can be different. For the Governor not only proclaimed that Californians can and will meet the goal of Algebra for all in the 8th grade, but also made an explicit commitment to devote the necessary resources to get the job done.

So I implore you to move past the rhetoric. Vote "Nay" to the Department's blueprint, follow the Governor's recommendation, and enter into a compliance agreement that does away with General Mathematics as a grade level assessment in favor of Algebra Readiness and ensures Algebra I for all over time. Yes, hold the line on making sure that Algebra is our standard, not just a laudable goal. Otherwise, our standards are just another empty promise. But yes, also hold the line on making sure the Governor and state leaders provide the resources—and that the CDE and our great universities design and put into place effective curriculum models and supports for both teachers and kids. Otherwise, the compliance agreement too is just another empty promise.

Thank you for the honor of testifying before you today.

To download a copy of this testimony, please visit [www.edtrustwest.org](http://www.edtrustwest.org).

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#### **About the Education Trust**

The Education Trust—West is the West Coast partner of the national policy organization, the Education Trust. The organization works for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels, kindergarten through college with an emphasis on serving low-income, Latino, African-American and Native American students. The Education Trust—West works alongside policymakers, parents, education professionals, and business and community leaders, in cities and towns throughout California, who are trying to transform their schools and colleges into institutions that genuinely serve all students. To learn more about the Education Trust—West, visit [www.edtrustwest.org](http://www.edtrustwest.org).