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Q&A: Roy Romer **Former Colorado governor, LA Unified superintendent** ASBJ Editors

For our September 2007 "What is Ready?" cover package, the editors of *ASBJ* interviewed educators, scholars, and researchers about the topic of student readiness for the 21st century.

Roy Romer, the former governor of Colorado and one-time chairman of the Democratic Party, served for six years as superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District. He is now chairing Ed in 08, a \$60 million campaign funded by the Gates and Broad foundations to draw more attention to public education in the 2008 presidential race.

Editor: What is "ready"? What specific skills should students have when they leave high school to enter higher education or the workforce?

Romer: I happen to be 78. I was born in 1928, and where I graduated from high school, three people were bright in math. Two went to work as teletype operators at the Santa Fe railroad. I went into agriculture. So what was ready at that time was for a different set of jobs.

Ready now means you've got to have a higher level of skill and higher level of knowledge. The world is more complex. The world is more complicated, more digitized.

Being ready means a different set of skills now, that's the first thing. How do we define that? We define it by looking at what the job market requires when students graduate from high school or other school, and what do colleges require. We need to define the level of achievement in high school based upon what the next move is, what is the next requirement, base on what is the competition worldwide. Look at those two marks. What does the real world require? I find that we are slipping behind. We need to raise our standards, raise our expectations in math, English, science, and social studies.

Even our best students don't do as well as best students overseas. Korea does a much better job with math across the board. We can't get by with the excuse that we do well on the high end but not well on average. If you rank us [among] 29 industrial nations in math, we're 24th from the top. Our rank in problem solving and literacy skills is in the middle of the pack. We have a capacity in the income of this country and education level of parents that we should do much better.

There are 20 states working out a benchmark set of standards which are what meet what we call world-class requirements. What they have done is taken a strand of math and they have defined it throughout Algebra I, geometry . . . what level of performance you need to work and solve, and how well you do on them. They have developed standards that truly are world-class standards.

Now the challenge is we need to go out and adopt those uniformly in 50 states. Now we have 50 different states with 50 different standards. We need the political will and a way to get more consistent standards across state lines, and more rigorous standards without the federal government dictating it. We need to pull together the states and say, "It's your job to agree on what these standards are, and the federal government will give incentives to do that kind of work."

Editor: How well are schools preparing today's students for tomorrow's workplace challenges?

Romer: Some schools are doing a very good job, but they are few in number. By and large, the broad base of American schools is not performing. Let me give you three facts: The dropout rate is 1.2 million dropouts a year. Two, of those that do graduate, one-third have to take remedial work when they get to college. Three, you measure us against international standards, we are below average. We are 24 out of 28 on the TIMMS. There's pretty uniform agreement that we do not have the requirements in our high schools that European nations have. They simply expect more. They perform better, and they get better teaching accomplished.

It's not just about setting standards. We've got to get better teaching in the classrooms. We've got to get more time for students to learn because we have expectations of skills and knowledge that you can't learn in a 180-day school year and 6-and-a-half-hour school day. A lot of the world recognizes this.

Editor: Is 13 years of public school, using the current 180-day, 6 1/2 hour instructional formula, a realistic time limit to ensure readiness? If not, what can schools do differently?

Romer: We should be experimenting with ways we can extend the school day and school year, particularly for students who need extra effort and support. Massachusetts is doing this right now. They're experimenting with a group of schools ... that demonstrate that a longer school year really works in education.

This is a monetary cost, and as we evaluate this option, experiment with it, we can say, "Is it worth it, and how will we pay for it?"

I have the position in my mind that if we do not make this investment in education, our economy is going to suffer tremendously. That is one of the most important things to put on the table. Our nation has been very favored in terms of economic matters in the last 50 to 100 years. Now we're entering another 50 years where other nations are going to eat our lunch. Look at China and our balance of payments. We need to increase our ability to be productive or our standard of living is going to drop.

I do think the political will is there. The average American family is really worried that their children are not going to be able to afford the house their parents live in, that their children won't have the same standard of living because jobs will not be available as they used to be. They're going to a world filled with people who have greater skills. That fear will make them say this is an investment we have to make.

Editor: What can and should be done to ensure that programs teaching "readiness" skills are replicable across districts, states, and the nation?

Romer: There are several steps we can take. One of them is that they [districts, states, and the nation] have got to raise their expectations. They often will be satisfied with that they have. They think they're doing well. Iowa has state standards, and if you go and ask about the proficiency level of their students in math, they'll say, "We grade out at about 70 percent proficiency." But they go to a national test like NAEP, and you find they're only about 45 percent proficiency. But they do not know what they're real circumstance is because they're not measuring accurately. Measuring accurately is the first step to replication.

You need to be open to what works in other locations and look at and pick up and apply it. There's no rocket science here. It's just a matter of being willing to put the kind of discipline and changes that are needed to make it happen.

Frankly, certain principles need to be in place: First, high standards. Second, good, effective measurements. Three, you have to have well-trained teachers. Four, you need continual professional development of those teachers. Five, you've got to have special support and intervention for students early when they show they are falling behind, so they don't accumulate a big deficit. Those are some of the tools for replicating good practices.