

*Welcome to our first CAFE Corner Celebrity Spotlight!
We are proud to debut this new feature with...*



Please tell us your story. What was your career path like?

My mother was an immigrant from Panama who came to San Jose, California, to be a teacher. My father was a soldier who didn't return to his family after the Vietnam War. I was born at Fort Ord in Monterey, California. After my mother died when I was 6, my brother and I were raised by a cousin who we had never met until we showed up on her doorstep.

My family struggled and relied on public assistance programs to get out of poverty, but the amazing woman who raised me made sure I got a great public school education. My education allowed me to attend Temple University, where I became student body president. Later I earned dual master's degrees in Law and Social Policy and Social Work (MSW) from Bryn Mawr College.

I then began a career dedicated to service. I worked as a social worker for 20 years, focused on improving services provided to foster youth and directing programs that provide job training to at-risk youth in the East Bay Area. I also led programs to help provide for individuals with developmental disabilities. I spent 12 years working in schools, teaching life skills classes, after-school programs and career training. Eventually, I served on the Richmond City Council, and the West Contra Costa Unified School Board, where I coordinated a plan to keep schools open during the 2008 recession.

In the State Assembly, education was at the core of my focus. I served on the Assembly Education, Health, and Human Services Committees. I chaired the Assembly Labor Committee and the Assembly Select Committee on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) Education. And I authored legislation that expanded the free lunch program, bilingual education, and the Chafee Grant college scholarship program for foster youth, among other things.

I began the challenging but rewarding work of California State Superintendent of Public Instruction when I was sworn in on January 7, 2019. I currently live in Richmond with my two daughters who attend local public schools. They are my inspiration and a constant reminder about the promise of our neighborhood schools and the strong future that every child deserves.

What has been your biggest challenge since you became SSPI and how have you addressed it?

This is hard work. We have students across California that don't have equitable access and opportunities to many services they need, including the public school system. There are many people inside and outside the California Department of Education that are working to help all our students, and close opportunity gaps. But when it comes down to it, when anyone sees a problem in California's schools, no matter how big or small, I take ownership of it. That's a very challenging position to be in, but I've welcomed and accepted that responsibility head on.

My first task as State Superintendent was to create a high-performing team with deep expertise and leadership skills both inside and outside the building. Then, I highlighted several priority initiatives and launched 13 Transition Team workgroups to help us connect to our educators in the field, the "boots on to the ground", to identify ways to address the persistent achievement gap. We're now compiling the cross-cutting goals from each of the 13 Transition Teams so we can prioritize and move them forward.

It's important that when we have so many leaders in these fields already, and so much great work being done in these areas, everyone shares the same best practices. There are many people within the school system and outside the school system that want to work on a number of education issues—everything from closing the achievement gap, to the teacher shortage, and dual language learning. But we need to make sure they're communicating and working on shared issues, using the best research-based practices and staying in touch with what's happening in the classrooms, so that our collective work leads to the best outcomes for all students.

Have you noticed a common thread among the transition work group recommendations regarding biliteracy and/or multiculturalism?

The Dual Language Transition Team's work focuses on closing the achievement gap for English learners, immigrant, migrant students and all students by fully implementing the English Learner Roadmap Policy, expanding multilingual programs, and providing equitable access and systems to build on the rich cultural and linguistic assets students bring. The team wants all students to have the chance to develop cultural and linguistic pride so they can be successful and lead in the 21st century.

But many of the other workgroups also address multilingual students and dual language learners. We have an Improving Literacy Workgroup, which also concentrates on the unique strengths and needs of dual language learners and English learners, as well as migratory students who are also English learners. We have an Early Education Workgroup which points out that development in the Migrant Education Program begins in early childhood, with the school readiness services and Family Biliteracy programs.

The goal is for each of these workgroups to work collaboratively to build and refine systems that contribute to equitable educational opportunities. That way the state of California can better provide students of color,

underserved populations, English learners, and each California student, with the opportunities they need to succeed.

Which pending initiative or project are you most excited about?

My four main priorities are literacy for all, equal access to STEAM programs, reducing chronic absenteeism, and closing the achievement gap. All of these areas already have a long history of expertise and people who've dedicated their lives to this work. What I'm excited about is connecting the dots, and tapping into people who already are doing this work in local communities throughout the state, but encouraging everyone to do it through a lens of equity for all students.

For example, I'm excited about the new Superintendents' Advisory Council. Later today, I'm joining a phone call with a group of superintendents from across the state. We'll be sharing issues and lifting up best practices in the areas of: special education reform, STEAM, teacher credentialing and dual enrollment.

I'm excited to bring myself and the CDE as close as possible to the districts, schools, and ultimately the classroom. Having a council like this makes sure that at the state level, we're close to the communities and classrooms we need to serve and support. We want to hear from and listen to those doing the work, those who are both succeeding and struggling, at local education agencies across the state.

How is CDE supporting school districts in addressing the recent challenges faced by our immigrant students and their families?

There are a lot of challenges to our immigrant students and their families. Recently, the Public Charge Final Rule has caused confusion, fear, and trauma across the nation—and especially in California. There's so much anxiety about whether immigrants who receive certain public benefits will be penalized. We're gravely concerned that families won't access services they need because of the confusion surrounding this rule.

Therefore we're working hard to listen to, and communicate with families about the rule, and ensure the most accurate and comprehensive information about the rule's impact. It's important that parents know that public education is not covered by the rule, nor does it apply to school nutrition programs. And we want to encourage the completion of the meal application and alternate meal forms for free and reduced-priced meals.

We are particularly concerned that our immigrant students will go hungry. So we want to repeat: The National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Seamless Summer Option, Afterschool Meal Supplement, Special Milk Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, and Summer Food Service Program are NOT considered public benefits that could impact an individual's immigration status.

We are already communicating this message via public service announcements, letters to schools, and social media. And we hope that all school communities share it widely as well.

Thank you, Supt. Thurmond, for sharing your story with the CABE membership!