

Students, Officials Discuss Challenges Schools Face

City Star, *Jack Muse*

5 June 2008 - A group of local students met Wednesday with state and city officials to express their concerns and engage themselves in a larger dialogue about entering the global economy.

Students from Burton High School and the International Studies Academy gathered in the academy's library for a roundtable discussion with state Superintendent of Public Instruction **Jack O'Connell** and **Don Ernst**, the mayor's director of education policy.

The event was put on by World Savvy, a local organization that sponsors educational programs connecting students to the rest of the world.

"One of our goals as an organization is to create active, engaged citizens," said **Kelly Korenak**, a program associate with World Savvy. She hoped that the students would "go back to (their) schools...and continue the conversation."

O'Connell and Ernst each spoke of the challenges facing San Francisco schools at a time when the financial situation in both Sacramento and City Hall is bleak. There was some cause for optimism, however, in the aftermath of the successful passage of Proposition A on Tuesday.

"We're very excited," Ernst said of the initiative that will collect a tax on parcels of land in order to fund an increase in teacher salaries. "It's a good thing for the teachers but, more importantly, good for the children and their families."

The new funding comes at a time when teachers are bracing for the worst as Gov. **Arnold Schwarzenegger** pushes a \$4.8-billion cut in education spending for the 2008-09 fiscal year.

Already 24,000 education professionals throughout the state have received pink slips, warning them their job may be in jeopardy.

O'Connell told the students he asked Schwarzenegger to fully fund Proposition 98, a 1988 initiative requiring that a certain portion of the state budget go toward education.

Describing his conversation with the governor, O'Connell said Schwarzenegger told him, "Jack, we have a spending problem" to which he responded, "We don't have a spending problem, we have a problem with our priorities."

Ernst urged students to engage themselves with issues they care about and to train their eyes on the global concerns of hunger, poverty and the environment. Ernst said the drive couldn't come from the mayor or the governor but need to come "from within."

"Connect to what your interests are, your passion," Ernst said.

On the other side of the conversation, students voiced their grievances.

One International Studies Academy student described being assigned to an honors Spanish class but ending up in the introductory class because there was no teacher.

In her advanced calculus class, she added, students were forced to sit on the floor because there weren't enough desks.

She said she needed these classes and these credits to pursue a career as a doctor.

"Without a teacher, without the materials, I can not achieve that goal," the student said.

"What you're saying is really heart wrenching," Ernst responded. "Shame on us for allowing a system that allows that to happen."

He again expressed hope that Proposition A would help attract and hold quality teachers.