

Note: The following is an interview on education with outgoing Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa that took place on Wednesday, June 19.

The questions are edited for brevity and clarity but not content.

Parenthetical additions to the mayor's remarks are sometimes included for clarity because on some issues the mayor spoke in a form of rhetorical shorthand.

There are also separate annotations that address fact-checking issues and provide background.

With the mayor was a communications staff member and Joan Sullivan, his deputy mayor for education, whose occasional brief remarks also are included below.

The interview was conducted by reporters Teresa Watanabe and Howard Blume. The transcript was prepared by Blume.

Villaraigosa: First of all, let me apologize for keeping you waiting in the way that I did. As I said I actually had two education meetings. By the way in the last eight years, multiple meetings a week on education, visits to schools. There's rarely been a week—I don't think there's ever been a time when we didn't meet multiple times on education.

Interestingly enough, in addition to this interview, we had two meetings. One was with [school board member] Steve Zimmer. We had an opportunity to discuss the path ahead. I made it clear that I was going to be involved with the Partnership schools going forward.

I've also shared that with the mayor elect. I will continue to visit schools. Fund raise for the for Partnership. Work with the board to set ambitious goals to continue our improvement.

Getting back to our discussion with Mr. Zimmer, I said that I would also continue to be involved in the school board elections. We both shared—we've known each other for more than 20 years—we both shared that we know each other as well as we do and we both come from—to this issue with a great deal of passion and a commitment. And we talked about our mutual respect in that regard.

We even talked about where there are some areas of agreement going forward and that we didn't identify any areas of disagreement, but what we said was continue to talk and try to work out areas where we might disagree.

And then in the second meeting, I met with the education reform leaders.

L.A. Times: Which ones?

Villaraigosa: [I will] just tell you education reform leaders for now. And we reaffirmed with them as well my commitment to improving our schools and involved in school board elections and stay involved with the Partnership schools. And that the successes we've been able to enjoy over the last eight years must be a foundation for even greater success.

L.A. Times: Would this be in alliance with the team of incoming Mayor Garcetti or are you prepared to fill a perceived vacuum in leadership on this issue from the new mayor?

Villaraigosa: That has nothing to do with—I have a great deal of respect for the mayor-elect. This has nothing to do with that. I'm only taking responsibility for my actions. I said eight years ago that I was absolutely committed to improving our schools. I've demonstrated that and that won't end with my term as mayor.

L.A. Times: A lot of people say that your greatest impacts have included a major role in the selection of the superintendent, creating the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, your advocacy of choice, and the Coalition for School Reform--your vehicle involvement in school board elections. Would you agree that those are the hallmarks of your education effort?

Villaraigosa: What I would say, just to start off, and I want to thank you for agreeing to print this whole thing at least on the computer, or, what it's called, on the Internet, even though the story might be shorter. I've not thought a lot about legacy. I've thought more about results. So, you know, before I was elected, mayors had been involved in after-school programs. [Former L.A. Mayor Tom] Bradley had the foresight to start, to found, L.A.'s Best [an afterschool program]. There were about—and you get the exact numbers—my recollection, about 120 of them when I became mayor. I raised \$7 million for L.A.'s Best.

We've, in my first inaugural, remember that night over there, just before I got elected, the night before, or the week, or something like that, we did a big event at the Music Center and raised \$7 million for L.A.'s Best. We've increased L.A.'s Best from 120 to 180, roughly a third of the schools have been increases in these—so if all I had done was tinker with L.A. school programs, I think

in these eight years we've done more than anybody in eight years.

I really think we had to do more than that. If you remember, at first, I—we had a debate whether or not—what the dropout rate was. In fact, you all chronicled that debate early on. I said that only 50% of our kids were graduating. The school district said that wasn't true. We had five studies that proved. I actually was wrong. We had a 48% graduation rate, not a 50%.

Today, in that book that I'll give you, in this book that I'll give you. It says 64% graduation rate. Deasy has informed me that it's 66 now. So we went from 48% to 66. We went from a third of our schools failing to 10%. We've given parents more choices. You spoke to that. We've gone—we have more kids in charters. I think the exact number is about 160,000, but you get them the exact number. More kids than any school district in the country. We've tripled the number of charters. But more importantly, we've increased ninefold the number of charters at 800 [on the state's Academic Performance Index] and above.

We had 227 schools on year-round. Today there are three. What did that do? It added 16 more days to the calendar. Sixteen more days of instruction. But according to the UC Berkeley study on the impact of the schools construction program, for overcrowded schools, it was the equivalent of about 35 more days instruction. For severely overcrowded schools it was the equivalent of about 65 or 67.

You get them the exact numbers. But I'm trying to go off of my memory. My Partnership schools took on, as you all know and have chronicled, the lowest-performing schools in the city. This last year if they were a school system, you know, their own school district, and they're bigger than Santa Monica-Malibu, they're the most improved.

Jordan High School, which we closed—we supported the reconstitution of Jordan High School was the most improved high school in the state and we have three schools between 760 and 790 on the API in Watts. One is about to break 800 I think at the end of this summer when the numbers come out.

We started the parent college, the school report card. We started testing every kid [for the possibility of being] gifted. All those three innovations the school district adopted.

We sued—when we were losing 55% of our teachers at Gompers and Markham and the rest of the school district was losing three, we sued. We brought the civil rights community, the ACLU, Public Counsel.

Catherine Lhamon just got named [U.S.] assistant secretary for civil rights. She was the lawyer along with Mark Rosenbaum. So, we've enjoyed, we got my deputy mayor, who was the architect for a lot of this, Ray Cortines, appointed, working with the school board.

I didn't do that by myself. I didn't have a vote.

So we sued on seniority, tenure. We fought seniority rather. The Reed case protected not just my schools by 45 schools. We got involved in the Doe versus Deasy.

Agreeing with your newspaper and all and your colleagues have written about student growth over time and saying it should be included.

Public School Choice, so that you understand was a proposal by Yolie Flores Aguilar. But Yolie, Ray and Monica will confirm—Public School Choice was my idea. I said to them: People are

criticizing that we're building new schools. And the cost. So, and we have all these failing schools. So I said, every new school, every failing school, ought to have a plan. They ought to compete for an operator.

You have, have, 167, again, I'm going from memory, so you'll be to fact-check it, but 160-some-odd schools in Public School Choice.

Joan Sullivan: 164 had gone through different aggressive transformations including—

Villaraigosa: --that were part of

Sullivan: including Public School Choice.

Villaraigosa: including Public School Choice.

We were able to get a contract, working with the teachers union, that creates the evolution, that allows schools to adopt flexibilities and plans to improve their schools.

L.A. Times: We want to hit some of those points. On Public School Choice, in speaking with former school board member Yolie Flores and other supporters, they characterized that effort initially as a way to give high-quality charters access to the new campuses, rather than just let the district, which operates many low-performing schools, have control over every new campus. I have heard you were very unhappy after the first round, feeling that charters didn't get a fair break and that you laid down the law. You made it clear you wanted the second round of Public School Choice to be different.

Villaraigosa: That's partly true. It's mostly true. But let me correct you on the question. I didn't just want charters. I was totally

supportive of teacher collaboratives, of hybrids like my own—the Partnership schools—

Sullivan: Of good district plans.

Villaraigosa: Yeh, and charters. What I said was: It's got to be fair to all of them. And I didn't feel that the first round was—really gave, really treated them fairly. But we never did Public School Choice for charters. We did it to force failing and new schools to come up with metric-driven plans to improve the success.

I'm supportive—I have a traditional public school with the union, with a thick contract. I would like more flexibility. But if a school is succeeding, and it's a traditional public school, why would we have issue with it? It's when they're not succeeding.

And I thought it was important for the new schools, to say to the public, hey, we're going to start new. We're going to do something different than we've done in the past. We're not just going to work on the “outers,” you know, on the exterior, a great new school. We're going to work on the “inners,” great instruction.

Sullivan: The model is not of importance. It's the performance of the school, the track record.

Villaraigosa: That's exactly right. I wasn't favoring a model. I just felt like charters weren't getting a fair shake. Because I didn't have mayoral control, you know, this is all a negotiation. You have to work and struggle. I mean, so that you understand, we met virtually every week, superintendent, various schools board members, never going more than four because we had to respect the Brown Act. A lot of times two. But we met virtually every week.

I mean, look, I'm leaving, and I'm sitting here with Zimmer, Steve Zimmer. I'm leaving and I just sat down with the education-reform

community. This is a passion and something I'm absolutely committed to because, and, by the way, we're very proud and we just said that to the education reform leaders that I met with. I said: This is the only city in the country that has the civil rights community behind the education reform efforts. Everywhere else they've been on the other end. Here we have convinced them that this is the civil rights issue of our time. Because we're going to be 2.5 million down in the number of college graduates that the state needs, or specialized degrees by 2025. And it's all because of the achievement gap.

So, it's the civil rights issue of our time. The democracy issue of our time. If we don't have an enlightened citizenry, this democracy doesn't work. It's the economic issue of our time. We've got to graduate—not just graduate people, we've got to send them to college and give them skills. And, finally, according to [Stanley McChrystal](#), Connie Rice and, not Connie Rice, Condoleezza Rice, and Colin Powell, it's the national security issue of our time.

So, I believe strongly that we have to continue these efforts. And I intend to be involved. I won't be elected, but something tells me just by nature, you know, that this bully pulpit is one I'll be able to use to really bring attention to this issue.

L.A. Times: What have you learned in your eight years about what it takes to make education reform work, what does it take to make schools start improving?

Villaraigosa: You need a leader. It starts with the principal, a collaborative leader who respects teachers and supports teachers, who understands that parents have rights, roles and responsibilities and is integrating parents in decision-making in that school.

That leader in addition to being collaborative and collegial, has to also focus on instruction. I mean, you have great principals in this city and school district that are really great at operating those schools and they've never been—they spend very little time in the classroom.

So, our principals spend a lot of time in the classroom. What have we learned? I've tasked and said to our new leader, that one of the things I've liked about the [AUSL, Academy for Urban School Leadership] the Chicago model, is they're working on the culture, too. You know, in all my schools, [L.A. Times columnist] Sandy Banks wrote a little bit about it at Jordan, I go to, in my schools and say: Do you believe in you?

And they have to respond: I believe in me.

I told her I want that to be our mantra. We've got to believe in our kids. We've got to set cultural—there've got to be cultural things that distinguish—we have the uniforms, that was great. The parent piece, which is critical. We're doing a lot more to support our teachers and train them. We're providing blended learning—critical, but we have to have a culture in our schools that people see: Wow, this is different.

Here's, in the Chicago schools time is so important because you've heard [Chicago Mayor] Rahm [Emanuel] and the others talk about the fact that they don't have enough instructional time. Time is so important. The kids will count when they're transitioning from one activity to another. They'll go 1,2,3,4 and they're also sitting down focused. There's a discipline there with respect to time. I think that's another issue.

I love that the school board is moving on, you know,

Sullivan: Tablets?

Villaraigosa: Tablets. That's great. We've got to get into the 21st Century. We're doing the same thing. We've been doing it. That's part of why they're doing it. So, I've learned that improvement isn't always uniform as you said.

L.A. Times: Did you also learn it was harder than you thought when you first started? When you were engaged in that battle over who should control the school district with then-Supt. Roy Romer and other L.A. Unified officials, you suggested that you could achieve impressive results quickly.

Villaraigosa: When you look at the numbers overall, they are very impressive. I will say this: I always knew how hard this would be. I never, ever believed it would not be hard. But at the very beginning who knew—all this improvement was done when they cut more than a billion dollars out of their budget. We had to—the state forced the school district to cut all these teachers, to eliminate all these programs. Who would have known that we could have still improved these schools in the way that we have in the face of the most drastic cuts in how many years, decades, you tell me. I mean, these were drastic cuts.

So, I always knew it'd be tough, and, remember, what was the debate about Teresa, Howard. They said I was going to pick, cherry-pick. That I was going to get all the schools that were turning around, and that I was going to then bring them up a little higher and say that, you know, I did it.

I took the lowest-performing schools. And that's hard. And I always knew it would be hard. And, I think you'll see me in the schools this year. She's [referring to Joan Sullivan] insisting that I go to these schools and I will. I'll be in other schools, too.

We always thought it was important to go to my schools but also go to some of these other schools: the charter, the teacher collaboratives, successful schools, what's happening.

You know, when we walk in there, I come out and I said, "How come we're not doing that?" You know. Kipp, the Alliance, the one in Echo Park that I just love, the performance arts schools that's like closing in on 900 on the API [the state's Academic Performance Index].

Sullivan: Gabriella.

Villaraigosa: I mean, these kids can learn.

L.A. Times: The district has made these gains despite budget cutbacks and despite the fact that policies you favor have not been broadly used. These include weakening or eliminating seniority protections and tying teaching evaluation to student progress using test scores, Do you feel that those measures are really needed given the progress made without them?

Villaraigosa: Yes, Teresa, we've got to do it. C'mon, I mean, this new contract allows for a little more than we had before. It's a step in the right direction. You've heard me say that before. We've got to go further. But we don't have the political support for that yet.

I do believe we must go further. I'm still going to continue to challenge the issue of seniority. I think it's broken. I mean, if I had run for a third term and, there was an ability to do that, and I said: Vote for me. I've been here the longest. Who, who would vote for you because you said that? You know, you can't have every decision, you guys are still at the Times at a time--

L.A. Times: Because we've been there the longest—

Villaraigosa: --of so many cutbacks because you produce good stories. If you didn't you'd be cut. But we can't continue. That, that system's not working. So, yes, I do think we need to continue.

I'm supporting Gov. Brown [on his new funding formula for schools]. I think the money needs to follow the kid. I think we need to break the silos of the categorical programs. We have to. We don't have enough money in each one of those categories to really make a difference. It's better to be able to direct that in a smart way.

Q: How concerned are you about the future path of the district with you leaving office? What are your biggest concerns?

Villaraigosa: Rather than look at my biggest concerns, I'd say the challenges are to build on accelerating the improvement that you mentioned. I think we have to do that. It's great that we've gone from 48 to 66, but guess what? We ought to be at 100. The two of you would not tolerate your kids not graduating from school, from high school. No parent should tolerate it.

Sullivan: And that's just a first step. They have to get to college and...

Villaraigosa: I was going to say—thank you very much. I was going to get there. But high school isn't enough. We've got to get them to college or give them a work-ready skill, so we have to continue this effort. You know, look, at some of my schools we're learning Mandarin.

I was saying to Joan [Sullivan]. Joan, we've got to step it up. More of our kids got to speak two and three languages. I'm part of the 100,000 strong who teach kids Mandarin. We've got to make sure they read and write English, but they've gotta be literate in other

languages in a city this diverse. The fact that I speak Spanish is an asset. Speaking Korean or Mandarin or Tagalog is an asset.

L.A. Times: I was speaking with Ray Cortines, who had nice things to say about you. But he also acknowledged that, toward the end of his tenure as superintendent, he was getting the message from you that you felt change was not occurring fast enough. His concern was that if you push too hard on the system you get backlash, that there is a tipping point between pushing fast and pushing too fast. He said you put that point in a different place essentially and that you made it very clear that you felt he wasn't pushing fast enough.

Villaraigosa: That's why I kind of wanted to do this, where we're doing a verbatim transcript, too. Because let me start off by saying, I have the utmost respect for Ray Cortines. He was the architect of my plan. He was my deputy mayor for education. He's the one—I didn't come up with all of—I came up with the big "dream with me," that we were going to improve our schools with AB1381 [the L.A. Unified mayoral takeover legislation that the courts threw out] and the like [and] giving us the authority to partner with schools. But Ray was—did the Schoolhouse—what was it?

Sullivan: The Schoolhouse Framework.

Villaraigosa: The Schoolhouse Framework, I think it's called. The elements of schoolhouse success. Remember when we did that? That was Ray. Ray and Marshall [Tuck]. So I worked hard with the school board, to make sure they had the right superintendent in place to put these changes in effect. And he was that right person.

Look, like he said, we mostly agreed. Nobody agrees all the time. I was very supportive of his efforts. I'll acknowledge this: I have a fierce urgency of now. That sometimes is disruptive. You know I'm

a believer that change comes when you're willing to mix it up and push hard and set high, ambitious and sometimes goals that people think are fairly difficult to get to.

[Staffer alerts mayor that he is running late for his next appointment.]

Villaraigosa: I just want to give them some more time because we kept them waiting a long time. That's going to be in the transcript. We kept them waiting a long time. So let's go, but thank you. How late am I?

Staffer: It started at 5:30. It's 5:37.

Villaraigosa: The press conference started at 5:30? Are you sure?

Staffer: Yes.

Villaraigosa: OK. A little more.

L.A. Times: I heard that you were the person principally responsible for bringing L.A schools Supt. John Deasy to Los Angeles. Is that fair to say?

Villaraigosa: Look, I don't have a vote on the school board, so I didn't make him superintendent, but, yes, I was a big advocate for him coming to Los Angeles, accepting an assistant superintendent position and then being named superintendent of L.A. Unified. But I couldn't have done it without Monica [school board president Monica Garcia]. I couldn't have done it without the school board, all of the school board members who supported it, and I think they did on a 5 to 2 or 6 to 1 vote.

I couldn't have done it without them. I don't have a vote. And that's the problem everybody. I'll be honest with you. Rahm

[Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel] is closing down failing schools. That's not popular. He's getting beat up for it. But you know what? We can't continue to allow failing schools to exist. You know why we were able to turn around Jordan in the way that we did? Because we closed it down and reconstituted it. We never would have been able to do it with the same faculty.

The fact is I think it's accurate to say about me that the fierce urgency of now has been fairly disruptive, has caused many people a lot of indigestion. I don't ask for forgiveness for standing up for these kids.

I'm here today because after I dropped out I went back. Cause I had a great mom and a teacher who believed in me. Because I believed in myself. We can't keep on losing these number of kids. The reason why I'm going to continue this effort, even though I have no portfolio is because I see the future. The future is bright if we can educate our kids. If we don't, shame on us.

L.A. Times: What is your analysis of the last election and what happened there? [Two of the three candidates endorsed by Villaraigosa's fundraising political-action committee lost, despite having greater financial resources.]

Villaraigosa: We're in the process of looking at the voter file and trying to understand. I can't tell you that I know exactly what happened. I think we had a great candidate in Kate [Anderson]. [She lost to incumbent Steve Zimmer.] I think Monica Ratliff turned out to be a better candidate. [She defeated Antonio Sanchez, who had the mayor's backing.] So, one instance, you have a great candidate and they lose, and the other instance, a great candidate wins.

I don't know exactly what happened, but you guys have been following this for a long time. You've been to some of the schools

with me. You're sitting two feet away, three feet away, from me. I'm dogged and indefatigable and I will continue to fight for these kids because I believe in them. And I want to do that working with as many people as possible, but I'm not, I won't be deterred in continuing to push for more improvement.

L.A. Times: What have been your biggest disappointments on the education front?

Villaraigosa: I would have liked to see every failing school there, every PI5 school [a persistently low-performing schools according to federal rules], and the ones on the edges, have a lot more flexibility.

L.A. Times: Flexibility to change staffs?

Villaraigosa: To improve, to change staff, a lot more flexibility to put in the best practices that we need to improve our schools.

Sullivan: Longer school days.

Villaraigosa: Longer school day. That's exactly right. I mean, one of the things, very, very important.

Sullivan: More common planning time.

Villaraigosa: Yeh, all of that. More common planning time. More, more focus on teacher development.

Sullivan: [unintelligible]

Villaraigosa: Blended teachers. What's it called when you— mutual—

Sullivan: consent.

Villaraigosa: You know where both the principal and the teacher want to come to that school, and if you don't, well then guess what?

I think we needed, I think we need to close down more schools that are failing. I really do.

L.A. Times: Some teachers who voted their schools into your Partnership said they never received the share of authority at schools they thought they were promised. And some also object to being denied the chance to vote on remaining in the Partnership when the initial five-year term ended.

Villaraigosa: I think the answer to that, and we'll get you a copy. We had the best survey response since the Partnership started. I think some 75% of the teachers, a very high number, are mostly satisfied with the Partnership. It's the highest we've ever gotten. And I think what they're really satisfied [with] is not every detail of the Partnership. They're satisfied with the success.

I mean, these teachers are committed, all of—First of all, the vast majority of teachers are committed, dedicated, public servants. I have the utmost respect for them. I think we spend too much time on the ones that aren't.

L.A. Times: How so?

Villaraigosa: Well, there's too much time criticizing that small group of teachers that aren't as committed and successful and dedicated, and not enough time extolling the virtues of the ones who are. And supporting them.

But I'll say this: What the—the reason why I think we had the best response so far is because these teachers are enjoying the

success that has come with the Partnership, the resources, the blended learning, the teacher development, and I think that, so that's what I would say.

But I guess I have to go. And it's already started.

L.A. Times: One really quick question. It must have been difficult after being a teachers-union organizer to turn around and become an adversary of the teachers union. Was there political fallout for you?

Villaraigosa: You know what I say about that? I'd say this: I still support teachers unions, UTLA, CTA, CFT. I've just been unwilling to put the interests of adults ahead of the interests of kids.

There's no upside—I'm a Democrat. There is no upside, none, in me challenging the most powerful Democratic stakeholder in the state. There's just none. The teachers union, and the reason why I wanted this be a verbatim—what did they— they spent more than a million dollars in 2001 [to support his campaign for mayor], close to that, maybe 500,000, I don't remember exactly, in 2005. And I've been willing to challenge my friends.

The last couple of days, there's been a lot of talk about, or a lot of speculation about governor. I can almost guarantee you: There'll be a repercussion for the fact that I've been willing to take on my friends.

You asked what I've learned—maybe you didn't ask it. But enough people have asked me what have I learned over the last eight years. I learned that you gotta make tough decisions in these jobs. You gotta fight for what you believe in, even if it's not popular. You have to have the courage of your convictions and you have to be able to say no to your best friends. So, I'm going to continue to fight for these kids and stand up for them.

Now, what I've said to my friends is: We've got to fund our schools, but the only way we're going to convince the public to do that is to connect funding to results. We've got to pay more teachers—I'm sorry, we've got to pay teachers more. But we have to lift the standards of the profession.

I think, more and more, there are teachers in the teachers union who understand that that could be a grand bargain. I'm going to in the next few years try to convince the teachers union that this is the path forward. That if we want more money for schools, we're going to have to show that we're doing more with the money we've got. That accountability has to be vertical and horizontal. You gotta hold principals accountable. You gotta hold teachers accountable. You gotta hold parents accountable.

That's why the parent college and all of our schools have such a strong parent component, cause we tell our parents in parent college: You have rights, but you also have roles and responsibilities.

I'll tell them in Spanish: You know, my Mom rode the bus, walked, but she went to my school. She went to her kids' school. You've got to come your kids' school, too. Parents got to take responsibility. Teachers and principals have to take responsibility. All of us, the community, has to take responsibility for improving our schools.

So I think there's a path ahead, and I would hope that they would see that I want to partner. But if you're asking me if I'm willing to go alone for these kids, the answer is yes.

L.A. Times: Do you see yourself in these kids?

Villaraigosa: You know, I'm glad you asked that question and I make this the last. Every time I go to these schools, I look in their eyes and I see me. And that's true whether they're black, white, Latino or Asian. When I see these kids, I say, "Look, you got talent. You can make it." I don't want to let these kids down. And that's why I do this. And that's why I'm going to continue to do this. And you know, next year, the year after, the year after that, whether I run for anything or not, I really believe this is, this is the only way to make this city, the city of America's hope and promise, that city, in a Pacific century. It's the only way to restore the luster of the California dream.

[If] we're not educating our kids, we will not take our rightful place in a Pacific century, when L.A. and California ought to be leading the way.

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