

Speech of Congressman Les AuCoin
OEA-PIE Convention
April 4, 1986

It's good to be with so many old friends. (Do a Reagan - mention a few names).

We're here because we share a common desire for excellence -- and a common concern about the state of education in our state.

Oregon schools are caught in a vise, squeezed between increasing demands and a declining revenue base. Always, hovering just over the horizon is the threat of yet another property tax limitation initiative.

It's a situation that doesn't provide you much satisfaction -- or room to work for the kind of schools you want.

Let's put everything on the table, right at the start.

You've just heard a bid for support from someone who says he is a friend of education. A leader in our legislature. A spokesman for his party.

So let's be fair. Tony Meeker does have a position of responsibility. He has been in the Oregon legislature for 17 years.

And in each and every one of those legislative sessions, school finance has been at the top of the agenda. It was there in 1969, when Tony Meeker entered the legislature. It was there in 1973 when he went to the Senate. It was there in 1981 when he took control of the minority caucus. And there it remains today, unsolved -- the biggest bloat on the record on nine straight legislatures.

And let me tell you why.

In 1973, the year I was Majority Leader in the Legislature, we had a tremendous opportunity to resolve the crisis in school financing. A governor from Tony Meeker's own party -- Tom McCall -- proposed the most dramatic change in school financing in Oregon history. A change that would have equalized funding for every school district in the state along the lines of the Supreme Court's Feranto decision, with 95% state support.

One of my proudest moments in the Legislature was when I helped steer through that bill. And if it had passed, you wouldn't have had to spend 1975, 1977, 1979, 1981, 1983 and 1985 desperately trying to find some way to keep the Oregon schools from going under.

So what happened in 1973? The Republicans in the legislature went around the state torpedoing Tom McCall's plan. And there, spokesman for the legislative Republicans, was Tony Meeker, shooting down 95% state support.

He's had 12 years to make amends. But here we are, with Oregon teachers still trapped in the vise, between increasing demands and a declining revenue base.

Is that leadership?

You know that the reason I've always had the strong support from educators in Oregon is because when the chips are down -- when we finally get down to the toughest issues -- I've been with you. I believe that economic development starts with the full development of resources. And the most important of those is the human mind. Anyone who says that we can divert resources from the educating and the nurturing and the expansion of the human mind and put it into missiles are out of touch with the kind of world we need to prepare for.

That was the decision we faced in 1981 -- not long after the landslide election of the most popular president in history -- when Ronald Reagan called for a drastic three-year cut in education programs in order to build a new generation of military toys, which Casper Weinberger is now playing with in Central America. I stood with you against those priorities and I took a lot of heat for that vote. But I'm proud of that vote, especially since it came in a year during which I got a 100% rating from OEA.

Now I'm realistic enough to know that I'm not always going to be 100%. And we have had some disagreements. But when it gets down to the real block buster issues, when the future of education is one the line, I've been with you. And that's because I'm a product of Oregon schools and I've made a commitment to myself, and to the future of this state, to see to it that the federal government is a working partner in educating our young people.

I've built a strong record in support of federal aid to education. Since Ronald Reagan came to office, I've gone head to head with him time and again to oppose his priorities, and to vote for budget and spending initiatives to increase education funding. I was a sponsor of the bill that created the Department of Education. I've helped defeat proposals for school prayer and tuition tax credits.

I was a co-sponsor of legislation to improve math and science education in the public schools.

A co-sponsor of the American Defense Education Act. I introduced legislation to reaffirm the federal investment in education, and brought a member of the OEA to Washington to testify in support.

I voted for passage of legislation to reauthorize college aid programs, Impact Aid and a host of other programs threatened by the Reagan Administration.

Last month, I voted against President Reagan's budget proposal, which would have cut over \$3 billion from federal education programs.

I've stood with you when it came time to choosing between aid to students or aid to the contras. Between funding the MX or investments in the human mind.

But no campaign is simply a referendum on the incumbent. It is an opportunity to measure the challenger against the incumbent. And so I invite you to ask the question: What are Tony Meeker's priorities?

The record says Tony Meeker wants to build a Star Wars defense system. In its preliminary research stage, Star Wars is already the biggest program in the defense budget, soaking up over \$5 billion a year -- \$2 trillion overall.

The record says Tony Meeker wants Congress to pass a constitutional amendment to balance the budget -- while spending \$5 billion a year on Star Wars research? Where does that leave education?

Nowhere, is where it leaves education.

The record says Tony Meeker opposed your plan to require group medical insurance for retirees. He voted against a bill to clarify procedures for reduction in force. He was the only senator to vote against a bill providing a three year-dollar levy. He opposed legislation allowing school districts to hold special elections, though some were about to close their doors.

Is this a record of leadership? Or is it a record of missed opportunities.

We are going through a difficult attempt to rebuild the underpinnings of the most complex economic engine in the world. We can't run the risk of any more missed opportunities. And if education is going to achieve its rightful place, you need a representative in Congress:

Who fight for budgets that emphasize training, not military adventures in Nicaragua.

Who understands the rights and needs of employees in the public sector.

Who understands that, for Oregon's sake, we need to cut the deficit. But not by passing a balanced budget amendment that will devastate education.

These are the crucial tests. Because America can't wait. We can't wait until after we've build Star Wars to fully train the minds we need for the professions, for medicine, for the sciences, for the humanities, for computer technology. To be an excellent society, we can't wait.

Working together, we can do it. You're playing a key role and I enjoy working with you. Thank you.