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Ca state superintendent of public instruction.

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — As the November election draws closer, California voters will soon decide who they want as the next State Superintendent of Public Instruction, incumbent Tony Thurmond or challenger Lance Christensen. Thurmond, a former Assembly member, was in charge of leading California’s public schools through the pandemic during his first term as superintendent. “The pandemic put a spotlight on some major disparities, like the fact that a million students went into the pandemic without a computer or access to high-speed internet,” Thurmond said. Thurmond secured funding for broadband infrastructure and worked to close the digital divide by helping families secure low-cost, high-speed internet during distance learning. “Now I want to take it to the next level. I want to move beyond just getting resources. I want to move to the point where we can show that we move things in a positive direction for our students,” Thurmond said.

While Thurmond is proud of his efforts through the pandemic. Christensen, who pushes a family-first approach to education, feels California has been lagging behind for years, and the pandemic only highlighted the issues. “A lot of people want to blame the pandemic for our academic problems and while that did severely strain our resources and created learning loss for a period of years, our education system has been in a free fall for years,” Christensen said. Christensen highlighted that since 2004, the Los Angeles Unified School District has gone from 750,000 kids to 435,000 kids. “That’s a problem,” Christensen said. “If we, as parents, don’t have any trust or faith in the system, we need to rebuild that trust from across the system.” Christensen decided to run for superintendent because he says he is fed up with the current public school system, and wants to bring more power to parents. “If I were to win the election, I’d do three things. One, the first position I would hire for is a parents’ rights advocate — a chief deputy to intercede on all issues and to counsel on things that pertain to parents and kids’ education,” Christensen said. Christensen is currently the Vice President of Education Policy and Government Affairs at the California Policy Center. Prior to that, he was the Chief of Staff for former State Senator John Moorlach from Orange County. Christensen has also promised to conduct a kids-first audit of the Department of Education and will work to strengthen relationships with local leaders. An issue Thurmond is focusing on now, and hopes to continue to do so if re-elected, is the mental health of students. Part of Thurmond’s proposals include recruiting 10,000 mental health professionals and offering a \$25,000 scholarship for people pursuing degrees in counseling. “This is a breakthrough. No other state in the nation has laid out a plan as bold as recruiting 10,000 counselors,” Thurmond said. “California’s going to lead and that means are kids are going to be healthier and be more successful academically.” Thurmond is also focused on improving literacy rates in California. He’s set the goal of having every student in California be able to read by the third grade. “For whatever reason, it’s been decades that our education sector in this country has tried to reach that goal, and it has eluded us. I feel like now we have the resources and the willpower and the knowhow to get that done,” Thurmond said. In this past legislative cycle, the Department of Education secured \$250 million to bring in reading coaches and specialist to help them improve literacy rates. A point of contention between Thurmond and Christensen is the creation of the ethnic studies program in California. Thurmond praises the program for bringing more diverse topics to the classroom. “I’m very proud of our work to create an ethnic studies curriculum and a graduation requirement and it does mean... that many students of color will learn about the contributions of their ancestors,” Thurmond said. “And the reality is all students will do better academically, it’s proven ethnic studies helps all students do better.” Christensen says education has become too political, and it is time for curriculum to focus on common school subjects. “What the legislature has done is they’ve been very aggressive on this ethnic studies and in some places they’ve taken it a little bit further to a cultural Marxism approach — critical race theory — where they want to make these kids feel bad about who they are,” Christensen said. Though Thurmond and Christensen have disagreements on policy, they do share a common bond of being parents with children who attend public schools.

Thurmond has two daughters and Christensen has five children. Thurmond’s endorsements include the Los Angeles Times, California Teachers Association, Planned Parenthood Affiliates of California and the California Democratic Party. Christensen is backed by the Orange County Register, Reopen California Schools, and Patriots for Freedom, California Republican Party. Credit: Ashley Hopkinson/EdSourceVictor Reyes, 2, selects a book to read before a summer storytime in San Francisco.Credit: Ashley Hopkinson/EdSourceVictor Reyes, 2, selects a book to read before a summer storytime in San Francisco.California voters on June 7 will select who will lead the state’s Department of Education as the superintendent of public instruction. Incumbent Tony Thurmond, who is seeking re-election to a four-year term, has six opponents. To inform voters, EdSource is focusing this pre-election piece on the issue of early literacy and how California should tackle what experts have described as a literacy crisis. The stakes are high: research shows that students who aren’t reading at grade level by the third grade will struggle to catch up throughout their educational career. Only 48.5% of third graders tested at grade level or above in English language arts during the 2018-19 school year, before the pandemic stalled all learning. See below for the candidates’ answers to questions posed by EdSource reporters. Seven candidates are running. Joining incumbent Tony Thurmond are Marco Amaral, a special education teacher and South Bay Union School District trustee; Joseph Guy Campbell, who publishes books about Montessori schools and special education; Lance Christensen, vice president of education policy, California Policy Center; Jim Gibson, founder of a technology company and former Vista Unified trustee; Ainye E. Long, a math teacher and department chair in San Francisco Unified; and George Yang, a software architect. Gibson and Yang did not respond to EdSource’s questionnaire. They are vying to head up the state’s public education system, the California Department of Education, which serves more than 6 million K-12 students and employs about 2,700. As the top manager, the superintendent can use the bully pulpit of the office to advocate educational priorities. The post does not include control over the department’s budget, which must be approved by the Legislature and the governor. The job pays \$189,841 a year. The primary winner must get at least 50% of the vote. If no one does, the two candidates with the most votes will face a runoff in November. The office is nonpartisan and candidates cannot list their party affiliations on the ballot. Candidate biography: In the summer of 2021, Marco announced that he will be running for California state superintendent of public instruction as the first working K-12 teacher to ever do so. The campaign is fundamentally grounded in the understanding that it is the people most engaged within education that must change education. Are you happy with third grade reading test scores in California? If not, what changes would you make to improve them? I think most people that see our reading scores should be, at minimum, shocked. When you break down those scores by categories of students, we see that historically marginalized communities are disproportionately scoring lower than their more privileged peers. However, this is also only part of the story. According to the “California Reading Report Card,” what mattered most, in terms of student test performance, was the type of curriculum and instruction being used in districts/classrooms across the state. I have borne witness to incompetent curriculum application, such as the implementation of Lucy Calkins’ “Units of Study, Readers and Writers Workshop” – a now well-researched curriculum that has proven to be ineffective, especially in areas with a majority non-English-speaking population. Further, special education teachers are woefully under-resourced and overworked, this inevitably leads to lower test scores. We need a State Superintendent of Public Instruction who will improve reading and writing by doing three major things.



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