

Delaine Eastin

Running for re-election as state superintendent of schools, the outspoken former legislator may really have her eye on the governorship

By Sigrid Bathen



Illustrations by Norm Hines

Meetings of the California State Board of Education have not traditionally been crowd-pleasers, generally attracting the same insider assemblage of bureaucrats and school officials for hour after tedious hour of the two-day monthly gatherings. Appointed by Governor Pete Wilson, many board members are former educators, some "rewarded" for their political fealty, almost all Republicans. Increasingly, they have as much or more power over the schools than the elected state superintendent of public instruction, Delaine Eastin, who does not always attend their meetings and often disagrees with them when she does.

Until recently, when the sorry state of California's schools was rapidly becoming a major political embarrassment, nobody paid much attention to the board's monthly gatherings, and much of what it decided occurred in a public vacuum, rarely observed outside the educational establishment or covered by the news media.

But on this crisp, clear, December afternoon, as the

board prepares to adopt California's first-ever standards for the teaching of mathematics, it is standing-room only in the small meeting room in the state Department of Education headquarters on Capitol Mall. The "press table," set for two, is clearly inadequate for the gaggle of mostly print reporters from the state's major newspapers. The scene is made almost surreal by an unfortunately timed building renovation, framing the seated board members in front of a rippling, floor-to-ceiling, translucent plastic construction drape that reflects light like a wall of ice. Seated at the head of the table, directly in front of the icy plastic: Eastin, unsmiling, and board president Yvonne Larsen, smiling archly as she attempts to keep order in the noisy, messy room.

Accentuated by the backlit plastic sheet behind them, the longstanding enmity between the board president and the superintendent — two disparate figures in California's historically conflicted system of educational governance — is a palpable presence in the room. Often hamstrung by a

board appointed by a Republican governor openly hostile to many of her views, the blunt-speaking Eastin, a former Democratic state assemblywoman, holds a job with limited power over local schools and virtually no control over the huge education budget. She even must seek board approval to hire some of her key staff at the department.

So, besides arguing with the board and the governor, what exactly does Eastin do with her time?

It's late morning on the Friday before Christmas, and Eastin finally finds time for a face-to-face interview, one that is not conducted by cellular phone from her car. A disciplined and sometimes theatrical woman — she credits a high school drama teacher with helping her overcome severe adolescent shyness — she makes a grand entrance, wearing a bright red suit accented with gold and red patent leather pumps. Several staffers hover near the entrance to Eastin's fifth-floor office in the aging state education building, where the carpet in the superintendent's office was held together with duct tape when she took possession in January 1995. "Duct tape!" she exclaims. "And it was dirty, hadn't been replaced in 23 years!"

Outspoken, often irritating to colleagues and even friends, Eastin regularly airs her sometimes unconventional educational theories to just about anyone who will listen. An articulate, compelling public speaker, she has just returned from visiting schools in remote Trinity County — the 58th of California's 58 counties that she has visited in her first term and something she says was not achieved by any superintendent before her. Dismissing critics who say she travels too much, she clearly relishes this elemental political contact.

"Actually," she says, "there was something in the first state Constitution that the superintendent should 'travel by horse' to visit schools. I know people say I do it for political reasons, but I actually think it was one of the most instructional things for my own development that I ever could have done. You cannot go to a rural county and fail to hear about the challenges of transportation, for example, and how much it takes out of their general operating budget. When Highway 395 collapses, it is a tragedy and an inconvenience. But for the children who go to school in Lone Pine, it literally means traveling through Nevada to get to school, adding 45 minutes a day to their commute. So you get a much different picture when you get on the road."

She has also gained something of a national reputation — and, as a result, the enduring enmity of some state board members — by traveling to Washington, D.C., to support President Bill Clinton's push for national school testing. Her picture was on the front page of the *New York Times* with Clinton. She and Larsen traded several especially barbed letters after Larsen suggested Eastin advise the board before making a national junket on an issue as sensitive as school standards, which implied to Eastin that she needed permission. Both say they've since mended their fences — "all that happens when you don't mend the fences is the cattle get out," says Eastin. But the relationship took another frosty turn in the recent flap over math standards, when Eastin accused the board of "dumbing down" the standards recommended by the state Academic Standards Commission, and again when the board sued Eastin in a continuing dispute over the policy-setting authority of the board, which was given broad policy powers over the superintendent in a landmark 1993 appellate court decision prior to Eastin's election.

Some prominent state educators — including those




generally supportive of Eastin's views — say her pugnacious style sometimes gets her in unnecessary trouble, such as the time she called Wilson a "knucklehead," then quickly apologized. "She spends a lot of time giving speeches, which is part of being superintendent," adds one prominent state educator, who, like several others, asked not to be named. "But you also have to mind the store." In the state Legislature, although she was regarded as an articulate advocate of educational issues and a lawmaker who could stand up to former Assembly Speaker Willie Brown, her colleagues recall a "confrontational" style that could be aggravating.

Conversations with Eastin often tend to become mini-speeches, or, as several critics put it, "30-second sound bites." Fellow legislators recall, with some amusement, her speeches, even to Democratic colleagues in caucus. "She would make the same speeches," said one legislator. "It's like your colleague is lecturing to you with the same stories. She just sometimes gets carried away."

Even board members who have not previously been openly critical of Eastin were stunned by her very public broadside against the board on the math standards. "Some of the name-calling and use of words like 'dumbing down' were a bit inflammatory," says Robert Trigg, a highly respected former superintendent of the Elk Grove Unified School District near Sacramento who is one of two Democrats on the board. "There were very fine people on both sides of that issue. It shouldn't be an issue where there are good guys and bad guys."

Eastin says her historically edgy relationship with the board "is chillier right now than it's been for a long time." She cites disagreements with the board over the handling of a San Francisco school desegregation case. And she remains disappointed by the board's action on the math standards. "They changed the standards in a way that I found to be unacceptable and frankly indefensible," she says. And she remains intensely, openly critical of Wilson, who has taken

an increasingly aggressive role in state education — a role she says he can't take until after public outcries about the declining state of California schools. She calls the governor's recent push for an education initiative on the November ballot "a dog's breakfast of ideas — pick some good ideas, put them together, and also lay the groundwork for [school] vouchers."

he ticks off a list of school policy issues of which she was an early advocate: mandatory summer school for kids who are falling behind, longer school years, tougher academic standards, performance-based management, technology, and the enormously popular push for smaller classes artfully claimed by Wilson as a personal triumph. "Class-size reduction is clearly something I talked about in the [1994] campaign," she says. "I was ridiculed for it by a variety of different people who said it was too expensive, irresponsible and impossible. I fought to bring balance back into the reading curriculum, and attempted to bring it back into the math curriculum. I was one of the early advocates of lengthening the school year. Now we have people like [Senator] Jim Brulte holding press conferences saying they want to lengthen the school year. We've been trying to do that since I was in the Legislature. Where were you, Jim?"

She is adamant about her proposals for expanding the arts curriculum in schools, for universal preschool, even for a program of school gardens tended by students. Responding to critics who say California simply cannot afford every school improvement proposal, however noble, Eastin says: "If I were running the state like a business, I would make education the core interest of the budget of the state. If we could get this state's investment in education back to the national average, we could afford to do every single thing I have advocated."

Critics and supporters alike praise Eastin's stellar use of the bully pulpit, truly one of the superintendent's major — some say her only — political tool. "One of Delaine's greatest strengths is her ability to communicate to people outside Sacramento," says Senator Dede Alpert (D-Coronado). "Her storytelling ability, her ideas. When real people hear her talk, they are really jazzed by the whole thing and see a real vision for kids. While I don't always agree with every idea Delaine has, in the Legislature and as superintendent, [she] has at least put some things out there and has tried to move forward. I think sometimes the criticism of her is because she would take action before checking with the [education] interest groups. Her constituency is the children, not the educational establishment."

Eastin's aggressive, take-no-prisoners political persona is probably not well understood in the state — some would say hidebound — world of education policy. It is a realm in which the state superintendent has traditionally been a low-key mediator among many factions; an arena where the stereotypical image of endless arguments over the number of angels on the head of the pin is truly descriptive. Politicians don't always, well, *fit* in that milieu. Most of the state's superintendents in the ostensibly nonpartisan office have come from education rather than from politics — and Eastin's handlers are quick to point out that she was a community college instructor for eight years before she went to work as an executive for Pacific Telesis, and then into local

and state politics.

Ask her critics which story among many they are particularly tired of hearing, and they will tell you it's the one about her humble, blue-collar background, the daughter of a Navy machinist father with the soul of a poet and a mother who worked in a dress shop. But lately they are paying more attention, as she tells the whole story. When she does, the aggressive, pit-bull persona becomes uncharacteristically quiet, hesitant even.

In the 1950s when Eastin was growing up, "dysfunctional family" was not a household word. Dysfunctions were kept behind closed doors, dirty little and large family secrets up and down the block. Eastin's mother and maternal grandmother, who lived with her family, were both lifelong alcoholics, and when her father had to work nights, "the inmates were left to run the asylum," she says with a bitter smile. "They were not very good adults when they were drinking, neither one of them. They would have these incredible fights and throw things and scream." Her mother never drank on the job or went to work drunk, but she drank every night after work, making it difficult for the young Delaine to bring friends home after school.

"I had a friend, Karen, who lived up the street, and her family was a bit, well, unconventional, and so she and I would sort of hide out together," she recalls. "When I look back on it, on our block, there were a lot of different scandals and weird things going on. That's why I say if you're not from a dysfunctional family, you're married to someone who is, or both, or your best friend is..."

"Which is why I have always found it rather bizarre and un-American that we would say the reason kids aren't doing as well today, and the reason we can't expect as much, is because more kids are from dysfunctional families, because we've always had a lot of kids from dysfunctional families."

Born in San Diego, Eastin, 50, received her bachelor's degree from the University of California, Davis, and a master's degree in political science from UC Santa Barbara. She then taught government and political science in DeAnza, Ventura and Canada community colleges for eight years. She served two terms as a city councilwoman in Union City and was elected to the Assembly in 1986, chairing the Assembly Education Committee. Her 1994 campaign for state superintendent was a bruising contest against Maureen DiMarco, Wilson's first secretary of child development and education. She was virtually unopposed for re-election until last month, when bilingual education opponent Gloria Matta Tuchman, a Santa Ana teacher who finished fifth in a field of 12 candidates in 1994, announced she would run again. Tuchman, 56, is a Republican. Eastin lives in Fremont with her husband of 25 years, Jack Saunders, who works in corporate communications for Pacific Telesis but maintains a residence in Sacramento.

Widely believed to have ambitions for the governorship, she dismisses those notions as premature. "I think there are lots of good reasons why good people should want to be governor," she says, "but I think it's very hard in this [political] environment, because of the nastiness. And because of the cost, you're [not] going to see many daughters of machinists running for these jobs."

"I don't rule it out, but I don't rule it in. My husband's not a big fan. He thinks I ought to finish this second term and then we ought to go live on a desert island somewhere. That does have appeal." 🏠