

GOVERNOR JAMES B. HUNT, JR. ON ASIA IN THE SCHOOLS



Interviewed By Lucien Ellington

Photo source: www.itpi.dpi.state.nc.us/governors/hunt.html

Editor's Note:

Former four-time North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt is extremely well known for his work in education reform. Not only did Governor Hunt provide leadership that resulted in dramatic improvements in North Carolina schools, but he also became a national figure in school change through serving as Founding Chair of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, Founding Chair of the National Center for Public Policy and Education, and Chair of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.

Governor Hunt also has a long-time interest in Asia and the connection between Asian studies and American education. The Governor is now Co-chair of the Asia Society and Freeman Foundation-sponsored National Commission on Asia in the Schools, which just released its report in June of this year. Currently, Governor Hunt is with Womble, Carlyle, Sandridge and Rice, PLLC and is a trustee of the Asia Society.

What follows is an interview with Governor Hunt on the importance of improving teaching about Asia and strategies to achieve that goal. This interview would not have been possible without the dedicated efforts of Namji Steinemann. Namji, who is also an EAA editor, was Vice President of the Education Division of the Asia Society until summer 2001 and is now Associate Director of Education Programs at the East-West Center in Honolulu.

Lucien: Governor Hunt, could you please inform our readers how you became interested in Asia and about any memorable experiences you've had in Asian countries?

Governor Hunt: My fascination with Asia has deep roots, beginning with the two years I spent in Nepal as a Ford Foundation Economic Advisor to His Majesty's Government in 1964-6. We lived in Kathmandu, but my work took me over a good part of the country—often on foot. In fact, my wife had our third child there in a missionary hospital. You never forget those early experiences, especially those that allow you to travel to different parts of the world and to live and work in a new cultural setting. Later, as governor of North Carolina, I worked to help the public and the business communities understand just how intricately our economy is intertwined with that of Asia and other nations. North Carolina businesses compete directly with those of many Asian nations, so the competition is real. As part of that educational and economic mission, I led many trade delegations to Asian nations, and I'm proud to say we were able to attract substantial investment in North Carolina from that part of the world. I learned early in my career just how closely connected we are with Asia, and it was a small leap to realizing that we need to do a better job of educating students for a world in which Asia has become so important.

Lucien: Governor, I am sure many of our readers would also like to know why, as an educational reformer and state chief executive, you think it particularly important that American youth and their teachers know more about Asia.

Governor Hunt: I know I don't need to cite for your readers why Asia is important. They know far more than I! What I do know is that the way we teach about Asia today is less than satisfactory, and this is verified by a number of surveys, studies of curriculum and teaching, textbook analyses, and tests of students' and teachers' knowledge.

As governor of North Carolina, I was committed to educating children to high standards, and that is still my mission. But I don't see how we can claim to be educating kids to high standards if we are ignoring such a vital part of the world. The truth is, instead of educating our children for this century—the global information age—we are too often educating them for the past century—the industrial age. We know from Defense Department research that the United States is failing to graduate enough students with an expertise in foreign languages, cultures, and international policy concerns to fill the demands of business, government, and our universities. The knowledge gap is especially big when it comes to China and Korea. One of the Commission's own surveys revealed that one out of four college-bound high school students didn't know which ocean separates the United States from Asia. It's the Pacific, by the way!

The focus on high standards and education excellence these days, which I applaud, makes our inadequacies in teaching about Asia and the larger world all the more evident. We are just not doing enough of it, particularly at the precollegiate level, and, for the most part, what we are doing we are not doing well enough.

Lucien: It is encouraging to those of us who know how effective you have been as an educational reformer to learn that you are one of the co-chairs of the National Commission on Asia in the Schools. What proposed actions of the Commission excite you the most regarding their potential in helping American students and teachers learn more about Asia?

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Governor Hunt: What most excites me is the breadth and depth of what we are trying to do. We are looking at the entire education system, not just at one piece of it, in order to improve how we teach and learn about Asia—teacher preparation, curriculum, professional development, materials and resources, as well as public perceptions and misperceptions.

Lucien: *We know that many teachers are eager to teach more about Asia, and that students are eager to learn more. So why do so many Americans know so little?*

Governor Hunt: The Commission found any number of weak links. When schools do offer Asia-related material in classes, much of what passes for legitimate curriculum is outdated, superficial, or—even worse—distorted or inaccurate. What little we do teach, and the materials we use to teach it, is better suited to the age of the clipper ship than to the era of the computer chip. Textbooks often contain flaws and stereotypes. Schools of education offer little or no background on Asia to teachers. In fact, 95 percent of social studies teachers do not have adequate backgrounds to teach about Asia, even though Asia is specified in the social studies curriculum frameworks in most states.

This is all pretty grim news, but fortunately there are some superb exceptions to this general outlook. Among the most uplifting are the marvelous things some remarkable individuals—teachers, Asia scholars, and Asian studies outreach personnel—are doing all over the country to improve education about Asia. The work of those individuals represents many decades spent developing model programs and materials on Asia, and it serves as a valuable resource upon which the entire nation can build. As such, the Commission hopes to shine a light upon these efforts and call for their system-wide adoption, so all children and all teachers in all schools can benefit, not just the lucky few.

Lucien: *I am sure you are well aware that, while some national commissions have been very effective in stimulating reform, other national commissions have issued reports that were promptly forgotten. What actions do you see this particular commission taking to avoid the latter?*

Governor Hunt: Our report, “Asia in the Schools: Preparing Young Americans for Today’s Interconnected World,” is only the beginning. I would not be involved if I thought this document would enjoy a brief bout of fame on the media circuit, then disappear without a trace. Thanks to the long-term, visionary support of the Freeman Foundation, not to mention the expertise and commitment of the Asia Society, I’m happy to say that, instead of culminating the Commission’s work, this report heralds the start of a multi-year initiative. During that time, we will be building alliances, raising awareness, and expanding both the will and the wherewithal to carry the report recommendations forward.

I am fortunate to have as my colleagues in this venture a group of Commission members whose expertise covers a vast area, and who are well positioned to influence key decisions and to make things happen. They head or are a part of networks of teachers, superintendents, business people, and representatives of some of the most effective organizations in the world of education, curriculum, and business. Their determination, experience, and knowledge will amplify the impact of everything we do.

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statement in our favor. Our world is so vast, our educational system so scattered, and our teachers and students so many and so precious, no lone person and no single group can hope to succeed solo. For the change to be embraced by schools, teachers will need to demand it and know that they will receive support from the top. That’s where the Commissioners come in: they know the system, they know the players, they are part of or run the key networks, and they can influence decisions. So no one is alone in this endeavor. Our collective experience is our strength.

The field of Asian studies boasts many outstanding model programs and committed individuals who already are making a difference in their own communities. For that good work to take hold within our vast education system, we have to scale up these efforts to benefit all students and teachers. That’s what this Commission can help do.

Lucien: *As you are more than well aware, American public K–12 education is both highly decentralized and subject to the influence of many interest groups. What strategies do you see the Commission taking to deal with these potential barriers to the achievement of the Commission’s objectives?*

Governor Hunt: Rarely—if ever—has there been a proposal for changing the K–12 curriculum that has been instantly, universally embraced by all parties. Those of us who are veterans of past reform efforts have experience in overcoming obstacles, and we will bring that experience to bear on the Commission’s work.

Ours is a collaborative effort, as the eclectic nature of our Commission makes clear. We expect that we will be able to address most sensitivities and challenges, with the help of insights from the Commission members’ constituencies.

What we also have on our side is the momentum offered by the standards movement, which embraces any number of otherwise antagonistic entities, and which tends to unite a highly decentralized education system. State departments of education have implemented curriculum standards to provide guidance on what students should know and be able to do, and education associations and organizations have convened panels of experts to identify subject-area standards and student-performance models to guide assessment. This movement toward reexamining student skills affords an opportunity to make the case for expanded Asia-related curriculum content, which despite the earnest efforts of a growing number of committed individuals and groups, has been hit-or-miss to date. As standards are developed and revised, we have a wonderful opportunity to push for a more comprehensive and systematic approach to K–12 Asia-related studies at state and local levels.

What the Commission recommends is not a zero-sum game. Teaching about Asia is already a part of existing curricula, particularly for social studies, in most states. Not only can time already



While serving as Ford Foundation Economic Advisor to His Majesty's Government of Nepal, 1964-6, Jim Hunt had his office in the Singha Durbar (Lions Palace) pictured here. Before the revolution in 1951, this was the private dwelling of the Rana ruler. The palace then had 2,700 rooms and was one of the largest private dwellings in the world. Photo courtesy of James B. Hunt, Jr.

spent on Asia be better spent, but also teaching about Asia can be interwoven into other subjects—from the more obvious ones such as social studies and language arts, to even math and science—without adding to the time pressures of the teacher's or student's work. This should address the major category of questions we anticipate.

Lucien: *The readership of this journal, which consists of 10,000 college, university, and middle/secondary school faculty, constitutes probably the single largest group of knowledgeable Asianists in the United States. How do you see us aiding and abetting the work of the Commission?*

Governor Hunt: We are delighted to have the Association for Asian Studies as an ally in this endeavor. With your members' deep knowledge and expertise, you have much to offer to K–12 schools. We would encourage your scholars to get involved in their local schools and seek opportunities to work directly with teachers and students to bring Asia-related content alive. We would also ask AAS to support scholars doing outreach work, perhaps issuing a statement urging universities to count outstanding teaching and outreach works as a contribution on par with research in considering tenure appointments.

I'm sure some of the best ideas for ways to support the Commission's efforts will come from your members themselves, and we invite them to contact the Asia Society with their thoughts.

Lucien: *What would you urge other governors to do to advance this effort?*

Governor Hunt: Every governor understands for his or her state the importance of trade with other nations. Every one of them also knows how vital it is for the statewide and the national economic future to educate a workforce that is prepared to navigate the

world's increasingly international marketplace. By implication, each understands the importance of communicating international perspectives to students in their primary and secondary schools.

As chief stewards of their states' economic well-being and as innovators in education, governors should take the lead in raising public awareness of the need for better education about Asia and other regions of the world and in developing statewide plans for achieving that goal.

Specifically, the Commission calls upon governors to appoint by December 2001 a Task Force on International Education composed of education, business, media, academic, and civic leaders. The group would be charged with conducting a thorough inventory of each state's Asian and other international resources to examine how these could be used to further education and reporting its findings by December 2002. The report should establish an agenda for action at the state and local levels and develop criteria for monitoring progress.

In fact, I have the privilege of announcing that the governors of Michigan, Pennsylvania, Alabama, North Carolina, and Washington have already agreed to begin immediately putting the recommendations into action. This is the kind of enthusiasm that will move us forward, and we're grateful to all of them.

Lucien: *What do you think the business community should do to advance this issue, and why should they do it?*

Governor Hunt: Companies and corporations with ties around the globe and Asia understand the importance of instilling an international outlook and enhancing international experience among their workers. More and more companies and business organizations develop their own educational initiatives and training programs to keep their labor force and their companies competitive. The Commission will continue to rely upon them to lend their experience and expertise with these programs, and we hope to expand their involvement. One of the ways in which they can be helpful is by raising awareness of the importance of learning about Asia and urging educational leaders and government officials to support greater investments in the field. The Commission also calls upon business and civic leaders to assist schools and districts in creating "school-to-school" links with Asia, particularly using communications technology, so that 50,000, or almost half of the nation's schools, could have such links by 2010.

Let me finish by saying that I believe, as does this entire Commission, that educational isolationism can threaten our success as individuals and as a nation. Our children are not getting the best education about the rest of the world, and this matters. It matters that teachers lack the up-to-date, thorough, enlightened materials and preparation they need to teach about one of the most vital parts of the globe. It matters that the textbooks are stuck in a quaint time-warp when it comes to Asia. It matters that Americans go through life thinking of Asia as "foods and festivals," but failing to realize its vital role in global economics, security, health, culture, and environment.

In addition to preparing young people to cope in the international workplace and in the political realm, gaining a grasp on the world beyond U.S. borders can nurture tolerance, understanding, personal and intellectual growth, and the embrace of cultural diversity. These are the cornerstones of democratic citizenship, and they deserve our swift and lasting attention. ■