EdSource
Highlighting Strategies for Student Success

REPORT
MARCH 2014

# Reforming Testing and Accountability

## Essential Principles for Student Success in California

## Executive Summary

***California is in the midst of a fundamental remaking of its assessment and accountability system that has been in place for 15 years. The state has the opportunity to play a leadership role in developing a multi-faceted assessment and accountability system that goes beyond a narrow focus on test scores and that could be a model for the nation.***

The transition offers California the potential to develop a more effective system that will not only assess students in more meaningful ways across more parts of the school curriculum, but also will provide educators with meaningful information about their students to help drive academic improvement.

The changes are being driven by several significant reforms, including:

- The Common Core State Standards, adopted by the State Board of Education in August 2010, and the Next Generation Science Standards adopted in September 2013;
- The dramatic reform of California's school finance system, signed into law by Gov. Jerry Brown in July 2013;
- The passage of Assembly Bill 484 in September 2013—introducing a new statewide assessment system to replace the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program in place since 1997—and Senate Bill 1458 in September 2012, reforming the Academic Performance Index (API).

In addition, Gov. Brown has opened up a debate in California—likely the only such debate by any state in the nation—by questioning the overwhelming emphasis on testing in schools that has characterized most recent education reforms, and encouraging more locally driven evaluations of school performance.

The purpose of this EdSource report is threefold: to clarify the timeline for the revision of California's current testing and accountability system; to identify essential principles that must be incorporated into the new system for it to be most effective; and to make recommendations to ensure that whatever new system is developed happens in a timely way, and is most likely to have its desired outcome of improving student performance.

Because both *assessment* and *accountability*—how student academic abilities are assessed and how schools and districts are held accountable for student performance and their use


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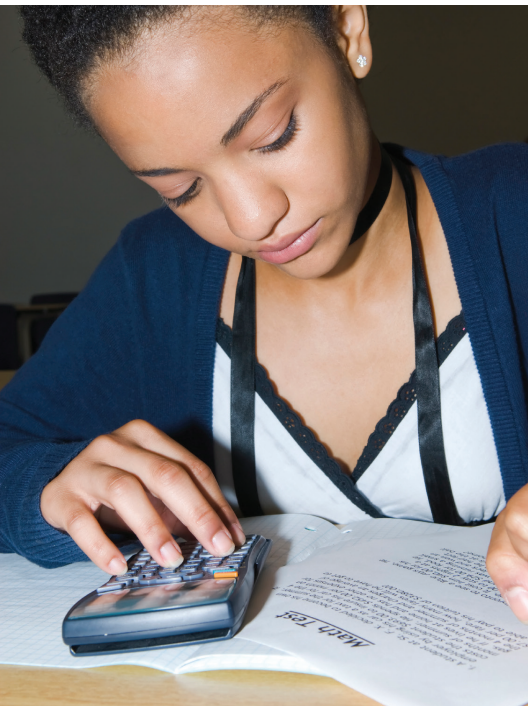
of taxpayer funds—are intimately related to each other, we examine both in this report. It is based on a nine-month review of the literature on testing and accountability, an examination of emerging models in other states, the tracking of key legislation, and interviews conducted with numerous education experts.

## *Essential Principles of a Revised Testing and Accountability System*

EdSource has identified eight essential principles that should form the foundation of the state's evolving testing and accountability systems. Many already are integrated into the reforms that are underway. For the new system to be most effective, reforms must move the state in the following directions:

1. From a system with an excessive focus on standardized test scores **to one that incorporates multiple measures that assess "deeper learning" and readiness for college and career success.**
2. From a system based solely on top-down accountability imposed by Sacramento and Washington, D.C., **to one that uses local assessments and accountability.**
3. From a system that depends on tests whose results are issued once a year—and typically have no impact on how individual students are taught—**to assessments that provide more immediate feedback in ways that help children learn and teachers teach more effectively.**
4. From a system based mainly on external rewards and punishments **to one that incorporates intrinsic incentives that motivate change among individual students, teachers and schools, along with the resources they need to succeed.**
5. From a system that is focused mainly on getting children to perform at a "proficient" level **to one that measures growth from year to year, motivates all children to do better, and encourages both students and schools to make progress at whatever level they are currently succeeding.**
6. From a system that focuses disproportionately on math and English language arts—often at the expense of other aspects of the school curriculum—**to a more balanced curriculum that incorporates other key subject areas, especially science.**
7. From an overly complex system that is hard for ordinary Californians to understand **to one that is more transparent and offers a multidimensional portrait of how students and schools are doing in clearer language.**
8. From an assessment system that uses technology mainly to report results to schools and the public **to one that uses technology more innovatively to provide more immediate feedback to teachers and students, and that tracks students' progress through the 12th grade and into college and the workplace.**



## Recommendations

**1. Publish a clear timeline:** To ensure that all major stakeholders are informed about the complex process for reforming the testing and accountability system, a clear timeline for all key milestones should be published by the California Department of Education in concert with the State Board of Education, and distributed widely to policymakers, parent and community organizations, school board members, and other education stakeholders.

**2. Establish broader oversight:** There is a danger that the various elements of the new testing and accountability system will evolve in an uncoordinated fashion, and in potentially conflicting ways. The State Board of Education should consider appointing an individual or group to oversee and coordinate the process with the Department of Education and other key constituencies to ensure that the necessary steps occur in a timely fashion, while still meeting the needs of students, schools and the state in general.

**3. Promote dialog on the role of testing:** The State Board of Education should initiate a statewide dialog about the role of testing in the state's emerging accountability system and the best way to evaluate a school's performance. This will be especially important as California moves away from its reliance on the Academic Performance Index as the primary way to evaluate school performance to one incorporating multiple measures as spelled out in school finance legislation and the Local Control and Accountability Plan that it mandates.

**4. Engage in a deliberative process:** Policymakers must proceed with deliberation to put into place a new testing and accountability system—avoiding doing so in an overly hasty fashion that yields unintended consequences. Because most key pieces of California's accountability system only need to be in place in 2015-16, policymakers have time to be discerning in crafting a new and coordinated strategy that builds on the best approaches being developed within California and in other states.

**5. Develop new science assessments:** Development of new science assessments is lagging behind those created for English language arts and math. Educators concerned about developing meaningful assessments in science should be encouraged to participate in stakeholder discussions that will be launched in the next several months. Key stakeholders in business, academia and public policy have the opportunity to play a greater leadership role at a crucial time to not only ensure that frameworks, curricula and assessments tied to the Next Generation Science Standards are developed in a timely way, but also to elevate the status of science within the school curriculum.

**6. Conduct an ongoing review:** After the key parts of the system are in place, a mechanism for continual review of the reforms must be instituted to ensure that they are meeting the needs of educators, and that they are providing

educators with meaningful information about their students that contributes to greater academic success. In addition, parents and other community stakeholders should have a way to be involved in the statewide review process, paralleling their involvement at a local level. This will be especially necessary because of the system's reliance on technology, which will inevitably undergo major changes as the reforms are being implemented.

**7. Provide adequate resources:** While students and schools must be held accountable for achieving results, the state must provide the resources necessary for them to do so. California schools in general remain underfunded compared to most other states. As a result, there needs to be a mechanism to monitor the resources and funding available to districts and to make recommendations to the Legislature to ensure that schools have what they need to successfully implement the new testing and accountability system described in this report.

## *Timing*

Because California's emerging testing and accountability system is driven by at least three pieces of legislation approved at different times, and in an uncoordinated fashion, the timing for implementation is multilayered and complex.

A major milestone will be the phase-out of the California Standards Tests and the administration of Smarter Balanced field tests in spring 2014. The full Smarter Balanced assessments will be administered for the first time in the spring of 2015. In March 2014, the State Board of Education suspended the Academic Performance Index (API) until 2015-16, while the state makes the transition to an API that reflects the Common Core–based tests as well as revisions to the high school API as a result of Senate Bill 1458. In 2015-16, the revised API will be implemented, along with new requirements for assessments of school performance in the eight "priority areas" spelled out in the school funding reform legislation signed by Gov. Brown in July 2013.

Full implementation of the new system will be a long-term process, as different pieces of the system will be rolled out at different times during the next several years, including new curricula and assessments in other subject areas, such as science. A full timeline can be found on pages 5 and 6.

# ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY TIMELINE IN CALIFORNIA

## 2010-11

**August 2010.** The State Board of Education adopts the Common Core State Standards in math and English language arts.

## 2011-12

**January 2012.** Gov. Jerry Brown first proposes to reform the school financing system, including a "weighted student formula" targeting funds at low-income students, English learners and foster children.

## 2012-13

**September 2012.** Senate Bill 1458, authored by Senate President pro Tem Darrell Steinberg and signed into law by Gov. Brown, mandates, by the 2015-16 school year, the expansion of the Academic Performance Index at the high school level to include college- and career-readiness and local accountability measures.

**January 2013.** Gov. Brown in his State of the State speech presents a revised proposal for reforming the school finance system, including the Local Control Funding Formula and an emphasis on local decision-making.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson sends a report to Gov. Brown and the Legislature, *Recommendations for Transitioning California to a New Assessment System.*

Modified versions of Common Core State Standards in mathematics and English language arts are adopted by the State Board of Education as recommended by the Academic Content Standards Commission.

**July 2013.** Assembly Bill 97, signed by Gov. Brown, reforms the school finance system through a Local Control Funding Formula and calls for assessing schools in eight "priority areas" that go far beyond test scores.

**August 2013.** Eight California districts that are part of the California Office of Education Reform (CORE) consortium, serving more than 1 million students, receive a one-year waiver from many No Child Left Behind (NCLB) provisions. The waiver plan includes a new School Quality Performance Index, to be implemented in the 2014-15 school year.

## 2013-14

**September 2013.** The Common Core State Standards are implemented in California schools to varying degrees.

The State Board of Education adopts the Next Generation Science Standards.

**October 2013.** Assembly Bill 484, signed by Gov. Brown, adopts a new statewide assessment system, the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), intended to replace the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program. It requires Smarter Balanced field tests for Common Core standards in math and English language arts for grades 3 through 8 and 11 in place of California Standards Tests in spring 2014.

**November 2013.** The State Board adopts a new math curriculum framework to provide guidance to teachers and administrators in implementing the Common Core standards.

**January 2014.** The State Board adopts regulations for district use of "supplemental" and "concentration" grants based on enrollments of high-needs students as prescribed by the Local Control Funding Formula.

The California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) program, initially including only Smarter Balanced assessments, officially replaces the STAR program.

The State Board adopts a template for local districts for the Local Control and Accountability Plan.

**March 2014.** The State Board of Education suspends the Academic Performance Index for two years.

**May 2014.** The State Board is expected to adopt a new curriculum framework for English language arts based on the Common Core.

**March–June 2014.** Smarter Balanced field tests will be administered in 3rd through 8th grades and 11th grade in math and English language arts. Some 9th and 10th graders will also take the field tests. No results will be published.

California Standards Tests and California Modified Assessments in science will be administered in grades 5, 8 and 10, as well as the California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA) in grades 2 through 11 for students with substantial cognitive disabilities.

California Standards Tests, including those in history and social sciences, and tests in most high school math and science courses (in biology, chemistry, earth sciences and physics) will be eliminated.

**Spring–December 2014.** Groups of subject matter experts will draw up frameworks for the Next Generation Science Standards.

**July 1, 2014.** Local education agencies (school districts, county offices, charter schools) have to adopt a three-year Local Control and Accountability Plan by this date.

**July 2014.** The State Board of Education will adopt an English language arts framework to provide guidance to teachers and administrators in implementing the Common Core standards and an implementation plan for the Next Generation Science Standards.

## 2014-15

**September 2014.** Common Core State Standards will be implemented to varying degrees in schools across the state.

**March–June 2015.** Computer-adaptive Smarter Balanced assessments on Common Core standards in English language arts and math will be administered in 3rd through 8th and 11th grades, and the results will be published for the first time.

**May 2015.** The Public Schools Accountability Act Advisory Committee will make its final recommendations to the State Board for reform of the Academic Performance Index.

**July or September 2015.** The State Board will approve the final revisions of the Academic Performance Index, based on recommendations of the Public Schools Accountability Act Advisory Committee.

## 2015-16

**2015-16 School Year.** The Academic Performance Index (API) will resume, reflecting results on the Smarter Balanced assessments as well as revisions to the high school API as a result of Senate Bill 1458.

**Oct. 1, 2015.** The State Board will create guidelines or "rubrics" for determining how schools are doing in the eight "priority areas" identified in the Local Control Funding Formula legislation.

**March 2016.** As prescribed by Assembly Bill 484, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction will provide a plan for additional student assessments, including history/social science, technology, and visual and performing arts. The Superintendent may also recommend additional assessments in English language arts, math and science, as well as other assessment modalities (e.g., reducing frequency of tests or doing matrix sampling so that not all students take all the annual tests).

## 2016-17

**2016-17 School Year.** The state will implement assessments for students whose primary language is one other than English.

Districts begin full implementation of the Next Generation Science Standards.

*"The laws that are in fashion demand tightly constrained curricula and reams of accountability data. All the better if it requires quiz-bits of information, regurgitated at regular intervals and stored in vast computers. Performance metrics, of course, are invoked like talismans. Distant authorities crack the whip, demanding quantitative measures and a stark, single number to encapsulate the precise achievement level of every child."*

—CALIFORNIA GOV. JERRY BROWN, 2013 STATE OF THE STATE SPEECH

# INTRODUCTION

California is at a pivotal moment in reforming the testing and accountability system used to assess how well its more than 6 million public school students, and the schools that they attend, are doing.

The transition presents a moment of enormous opportunity to develop a more effective system that not only assesses students in more meaningful ways, across more of the school curriculum, but also helps drive academic improvement.

Much heralded state and federal reforms during the past 14 years have been narrowly focused on how students perform on standardized tests, along with consequences—often negative ones—for schools, teachers and principals if students didn't meet expectations set by Sacramento and Washington.

Until now, the overwhelming emphasis at both the state and federal level has been on reading and math at the expense of other key parts of the school curriculum, including science, social studies and the arts, and with little regard to the "deeper learning" skills that students need to be successful in college and careers.

Voluminous research that shows the high correlation between test scores and the income level of a student's family has not guided past reforms. Also absent has been consideration of a range of non-school factors that have a direct impact on school outcomes, such as stresses students face in their homes and neighborhoods, their level of preparedness for school when entering kindergarten, and undiagnosed or untreated health problems. Instead, the overwhelming emphasis has been on holding schools—and teachers—entirely responsible for how their students perform.

Currently, almost every dimension of the testing and accountability system is under review, and California has an opportunity to emerge as a national leader in developing a new system that could be in place for another generation.

## *New circumstances provide opportunities for reform*

Each of the following circumstances helped create the current opportunity.

1. There is a deep sentiment among Republicans and Democrats, as well as educators and policymakers, that the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law has not achieved its intended purpose. Despite this broad agreement, Congress has not managed to replace it, creating an opening for California to shape what comes next.
2. California's reform of its school funding system will also have a dramatic impact on what schools and districts will be held accountable for. School districts will be evaluated on how well they do in eight "priority areas"

Photo by: cybrarian77

that must be outlined in a "Local Control and Accountability Plan." These include standard measures of student achievement—but go far beyond them to include how effectively schools involve parents and other novel dimensions, such as whether schools provide a positive "school climate" and are "engaging" students.

3. The thrust of the new accountability system is to provide struggling schools with support services rather than impose punitive sanctions. An entirely new state agency, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, with an initial budget of $15 million, is being set up precisely for this purpose.

4. In spring 2014, students for the first time will take a field test in English language arts and math aligned with the Common Core State Standards, replacing most multiple-choice tests that students in grades 2 through 11 have been taking since the Legislature established the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program in the spring of 1998.

5. The state already has set up a loosely defined California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress program (CAASPP), initially including only Smarter Balanced assessments, to officially replace the STAR program.

6. A consortium of eight California school districts—the only such alliance in the nation—received a waiver from some of the most onerous provisions of the NCLB law. These California Office to Reform Education (CORE) districts are establishing a much broader "School Quality Improvement Index" as an alternative to the Academic Performance Index. The School Quality Improvement index will include not only multiple academic measures, but also measures of school climate, social and emotional well being, and other "non-cognitive" factors.[1] These and other reforms could provide guidance for implementation of alternative measures in other districts.

7. Senate Bill 1458, authored by President pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, mandates broadening the Academic Performance Index to include measures of how well schools prepare students for college and careers. The process for revising the API is still underway, and is slated to be introduced in the 2015-16 school year.

8. The same legislation also calls for making science a more important part of the accountability system in California. In addition, in September 2013, the State Board of Education adopted the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), though without a timeline for their implementation.[2]

Affecting all of the above are the Common Core State Standards, which State Board of Education President Michael Kirst predicts will "impact almost all key state education policies in fundamental ways."[3]

NOTES

1 ESEA Flexibility Waiver Application.

2 "State Board adopts national K-12 Next Generation Science Standards," EdSource, Sept. 5, 2013.

3 Kirst, Michael, "The Common Core Meets State Policy: This Changes Almost Everything," Policy Analysis for California Education, March 2013.


Photo by Neil Hanshaw

## More emphasis on local decision making

These developments are all taking place at the same time that Gov. Jerry Brown is expressing deep skepticism about the emphasis on testing that has dominated the school reform agenda for more than a dozen years. As his administration outlined in the May revision to his 2011 budget:

> *Testing takes huge amounts of time from classroom instruction. Data collection requirements are cumbersome and do not provide timely—and therefore usable—information back to schools. Teachers are forced to curb their own creativity and engagement with students as they focus on teaching to the test. State and federal administrators continue to centralize teaching authority far from the classroom.*[4]

In addition, Gov. Brown has been pushing to drive more control to a local level, based on the principle of "subsidiarity" drawn from his years as a student in a Jesuit seminary.

> *Subsidiarity is the idea that a central authority should only perform those tasks which cannot be performed at a more immediate or local level.*[5]

This principle has also been at the core of Gov. Brown's reform of the state's opaque school finance system that had been in place for decades.

## Fundamental shift underway

Thus, on the testing side of the equation, California is in the midst of a fundamental shift in the way it assesses students' performance and, on the accountability side, how it holds schools accountable for how students do on the tests. As State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson noted in his far-reaching January 2013 report:

> *The time has come to remake our state's assessment system. As we do, we must set our sights on a new, more ambitious goal—creating a system that fosters high quality teaching and learning in every classroom.*[6]

At the same time, Deb Sigman, Torlakson's deputy superintendent of public instruction and the point person in the California Department of Education on testing and accountability, cautioned that "this is a very long-term project" that began in the 1980s with its emphasis on minimum competencies, continued into the 1990s with its focus on students being proficient, and is motivating the current reforms with their emphasis on college and career readiness.

Referring to Assembly Bill 484, the key legislation driving the reforms, she said:

> *This is a powerful and historical transformation. It (AB 484) recognizes that you can't get there in a day. It recognizes that there really is a transition period that needs to be reasonable, and deliberate, and that allows people the time and space to focus in on the instruction and delivery of college- and career-ready standards.*[7]

NOTES

4 Governor's Revision to Budget, May 2011.

5 "Brown lashes out at regulators and testers, makes case for reform," EdSource, Jan. 24, 2013.

Also State of the State Address, Jan. 13, 2013.

6 "Recommendations for Transitioning California to a Future Assessment System," California Department of Education, Jan. 13, 2013.

7 Comments at Policy Analysis for California Education Seminar, Sacramento, Oct. 3, 2013.

## Key legislation that is shaping testing and accountability

**Senate Bill 1458.** Legislation sponsored by Senate President pro Tempore Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, and signed into law by Gov. Jerry Brown in September 2012, to broaden the Academic Performance Index to include college and career readiness and other measures that go beyond test scores. SB 1458 also allows for the establishing of "locally convened panels to visit schools, observe teachers, interview pupils and examine pupil work."

**Assembly Bill 97.** Budget bill signed by Gov. Brown in July 2013, which reforms the school financing system, requires each district to draw up a Local Control and Accountability Plan, and establishes eight "priority areas" on which schools will be assessed. AB 97 also calls for more local decision making and parent and community involvement.

**Assembly Bill 484.** Signed by Gov. Brown in September 2013, it adopts a new statewide assessment system intended to replace the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program. AB 484 requires Smarter Balanced field tests for Common Core standards in math and English language arts in spring 2014 in grades 3 through 8 and 11 in place of California Standards Tests.

### *Coordinating reforms will be challenging*

Despite the great opportunity for reform, this will also be an extremely challenging period for educators in California, mainly because reform initiatives are occurring on multiple levels, each with its own timeline.

Several pieces of legislation have gone into effect at different times, mandating changes to different aspects of the assessment and accountability continuum, and creating some confusion as to how all the pieces of reform match up with each other.

- Approved September 2012: Senate Bill 1458 is intended to reform the high school Academic Performance Index.
- Approved July 2013: Assembly Bill 97, the Local Control Funding Formula, mandates a broader set of accountability measures—described as "priority areas"— than just the Academic Performance Index.
- Approved September 2013: Assembly Bill 484 institutes a new statewide assessment system intended to replace the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program.

Although the State Board of Education will have a key role—in tandem with the California Department of Education under the leadership of the state superintendent of public instruction—there is no single body that is charged with coming up with a unified system of testing and accountability.

Also involved in the process are national organizations, such as the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, a partnership of 25 states established to create a new set of tests based on the Common Core standards.

### *2015-16 will be a key year for implementation*

The key year for implementation of a new testing and accountability system in California is 2015-16.

In that school year, Senate Bill 1458 mandates that a revised Academic Performance Index will be in place, at least on the high school level. That is also the year the State Board of Education will approve regulations for how schools will be measured on their ability to succeed in the eight "priority areas" outlined in the school finance legislation. By then, students will already have taken the Common Core Smarter Balanced assessments the previous spring in reading and math, so that by 2015-16 there will be a baseline to measure their progress.

However, it will take several years longer before a complete accountability system will be fully in place. It is likely that new assessments in history and social science, as well as high school end-of-course tests in math and science, will still be under development, underscoring the magnitude of the task facing the state.

# CURRENT ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM IS URGENTLY IN NEED OF REFORM

For the past decade, California has operated under dual—and dueling—accountability systems. One is an accountability system established by the state through California's Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999. The other is the accountability system imposed by the federal government through the federal No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law in January 2002 by then-President George W. Bush.

Both are in urgent need of reform for at least the five following reasons:

**1. Federal and state accountability systems have resulted in contradictory assessments of performance.**

The state and federal accountability systems have produced conflicting outcomes, sending confusing messages to educators, parents, students and the public at large as to whether their schools are succeeding or not. Depending on which system they consult, Californians might be told that the same school is succeeding or failing. In other words, some schools may have reached their growth target as set by the state on the Academic Performance Index, but not have achieved "adequate yearly progress" as defined by the No Child Left Behind law either for the entire school or for any one of numerous student "subgroups" in the school.

An EdSource analysis of more than 7,000 California schools showed that in 2012, 57 percent were succeeding on one of three measures of progress set by the state's standards, but were simultaneously deemed not to have made "adequate yearly progress" under federal NCLB standards.[8]

The confusion over whether schools are succeeding or failing is not a new development, but has characterized California's school accountability system ever since the introduction of the No Child Left Behind law in 2002.

**2. Even though student scores have improved substantially on the California Standardized Tests, especially at the elementary and middle school levels, both federal and state systems have failed to come even close to closing the achievement gap.**[9]

The accountability systems, introduced at enormous cost and imposing multiple requirements on educators, have not resulted in closing the achievement gap.

While some schools have made more progress than others (as one would expect in a state with nearly 10,000 schools), on average the test score gap between white and Asian students on the one hand, and African American and Latino students on the other, remains far too high—between 20 and 30 percentage points on the California Standards Tests.

A similar pattern exists on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Although some progress has been made since the early 1990s—and much less during the past decade—enormous gaps still exist. In 4th grade reading in 2013, NAEP noted that "black students had an average score that was 30 points lower than white students. This performance gap was not significantly different from that in 1992 (36 points)." Similarly, the performance gap between Hispanic and white students had also not changed significantly since then, according to NAEP.[10]

**3. The federal accountability system has been especially ineffective in getting students and schools to meet the performance goals established more than a decade ago. But even under the state system, despite progress, many schools still have not reached the state target of an 800 score on the Academic Performance Index.**

Achieving the NCLB goals has been especially elusive, mainly because the law has set an impossible goal for California, as well as all other states, to achieve. Under the law, every student in every school is supposed to score at a "proficient" level on state English language arts and math tests by the end of the 2013-14 school year.

On the most recent battery of state tests administered in the spring of 2013, 56.4 percent of students in California scored at a proficient level or higher on California's English language arts test, and 51.2 percent did so on math tests. On the positive side, these figures represent a significant increase in proficiency levels since 2003, when only 35 percent of students scored at a proficient level in both math and English. But they fall far short of the 100 percent proficiency prescribed by the NCLB law. State leaders also had expectations that during a 15-year period well more than half of its students would be performing at a proficient level.[11]

**4. A large number of schools have not turned around in response to the range of sanctions contained in both the state and federal accountability systems.**

In tandem with a substantial number of students failing to score at a proficient level on state tests, increasing numbers of schools have been labeled as essentially failing under NCLB.

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8 Under the state's accountability system, schools are evaluated on whether the school 1) met a schoolwide growth target for improved test scores; 2) all of the school's student subgroups met their growth targets; or 3) the school and all student subgroups met their growth targets.

9 2013 STAR results.

10 NAEP's 2013 Report Card, Reporting Snapshot on California.

11 STAR Program, Summary of 2013 Results.

At the beginning of the 2013-14 school year, 90 percent of California's 6,135 schools receiving federal Title 1 funds for low-income children have been labeled as being in need of "Program Improvement," the effective equivalent of a failing school under the NCLB law. A school is deemed in need of Program Improvement if it fails to make "adequate yearly progress," as measured by NCLB, two years in a row. It is likely that by the end of the current year, the vast majority of Title I schools will receive this failing designation.

By contrast, schools did much better as measured by the state's standards. API scores have generally risen, and an API score that once would have placed a school above the median for the state now would place it in the bottom rung of schools.

Yet, large numbers of schools have also failed to reach the more modest growth targets set by the state's accountability system. By 2012, after nearly 15 years of effort, only 53 percent of schools reached or exceeded the state's goal of 800 on the API, underscoring how far the state still has to go.

**5. Both systems assess only a portion of the school curriculum.** Both federal and state laws have measured only a portion of what a student is expected to learn while in school. Both systems are heavily skewed to math and English language arts, either minimizing or leaving out altogether what students are learning in other subjects.

To determine whether a school is making "adequate yearly progress" as defined by the federal NCLB law, only test results in math and English language arts and proficiency rates on the California High School Exit Exam (which measures only English and math) are used.[12]

The state's Academic Performance Index is based on a somewhat broader set of tests. Under the state's system, in addition to math and English language arts, test scores in science in grades 5, 8 and 10, history-social science in grades 8 and 11 and, for grades 9-11, end-of-course, single-subject tests in science (biology, chemistry, earth science and physics) and world history are included in calculating API scores.[13]

But assessments of how students are doing in music, art, physical education and foreign language courses are absent from both federal and state systems, as are other indicators of a school's effectiveness, such as attendance and suspension and graduation rates. Science assessments, while given in some grades, continue to take a back seat to those in math and English language arts.

As Kevin Carey, director of education policy for the New America Foundation, has noted, "accountability systems that ignore much of what schools expect from students suffer from a fundamental lack of legitimacy."[14]

At a minimum, Californians deserve a much clearer set of accountability standards that don't conflict with each other, and which give them a sharper sense of the state's return on its annual investment of tens of billions of dollars in its public schools.

They also deserve an accountability system that measures all skills that children are acquiring in school, not just their answers on multiple-choice questions in math and English language arts.

NOTES

12 2012 Adequate Yearly Progress Reports Information Guide, California Department of Education.

13 Ibid.

14 See Carey, Kevin. "Some Assembly Required: Building a Better Accountability System in California," Education Sector, April 2012.

## ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES FOR AN EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

EdSource has identified eight essential principles that should form the foundation of the state's evolving assessment and accountability system. Many are already integrated into the reforms that are underway. For the new system to be most effective, reforms must move the state in the following directions.

***"This is a great time to engage in a broader community conversation about what a high quality school looks like to…various constituency groups, and what indicators or measures can be collected to document that quality."***

—CHUCK WEIS, FORMER SANTA CLARA COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

**ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLE #1:** ***From a system with an excessive focus on standardized test scores to one that incorporates multiple measures that assess "deeper learning" and readiness for college and career success.***

Remaking California's testing and accountability system must begin with rethinking and reforming the Academic Performance Index, which has been the main measure, instituted by the state in 1999, to hold schools "accountable" for improving tests scores from one year to the next.

In March 2014, the State Board of Education voted to suspend the API until 2015-16, while the state makes the transition to an API that reflects the new Common Core–based tests, as well as revisions to the high school API as a result of Senate Bill 1458.[15] However, the suspension of the API does not address some fundamental concerns that have been raised about its composition and usefulness.

The multiple flaws in the current API have been well documented. The clearest exposition of why it is in need of reform can be found in a Policy Analysis for California Education paper titled *Fixing the Academic Performance Index*.[16] Its authors outlined in compelling fashion eight problems with the API that "limit its potential utility and effectiveness." These include the API's narrow focus on test scores, its inability to track how well—or poorly—individual students are doing from year to year, and the fact that API scores correlate highly with poverty levels of students in a school or district.

The 14-member Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) Advisory Committee has been meeting regularly to come up with the best ways to implement SB 1458, including, for example, how to incorporate graduation rates in a school's API.[17] The advisory committee consists of testing experts, officials in charge of testing in their districts, charter school representatives, and representatives of organizations such as the California Teachers Association and the California State PTA.[18]

Even members of the PSAA advisory committee are questioning the API's usefulness, especially in the context of Gov. Brown's call for broader and more locally driven assessments. As a result, the index may end up as just a small portion of the state's testing and accountability system, rather than maintaining the dominant role it has played in the past.

NOTES

15 Senate Bill 1458.

16 Polikoff, Morgan and Andrew McEachin. *Fixing the Academic Performance Index,* PACE, January 2013.

17 PSAA minutes, June 25, 2013.

Webcasts of the meetings on the PSAA Advisory Committee are also available on the Department of Education website.

18 List of Advisory Committee members.

Chuck Weis, a former Santa Clara County superintendent of schools who has been on the PSAA Advisory Committee since its inception in 1999, described the API as a "rudimentary measure" that may have outlived its usefulness.

"I think it's time to rethink the API, rather than continue to try to squeeze new, more robust information into an old system," he told EdSource.

Weis says what is needed is a "broader conversation" about the kind of accountability system the state needs. "We should not just tinker with the API and then slap it back out there again because it really does not do what we want it to do," he said.

Even incorporating measures of how prepared students are for college and careers—as called for in Senate Bill 1458—is presenting the PSAA committee with considerable challenges, said Ting Sung, the committee's chair. She noted that critical thinking and creativity are essential dimensions of college and career readiness. "These are more difficult to measure," she said, "but we know that these are skills that are needed for students to be more successful in life—no matter what job or career path they choose."[19]

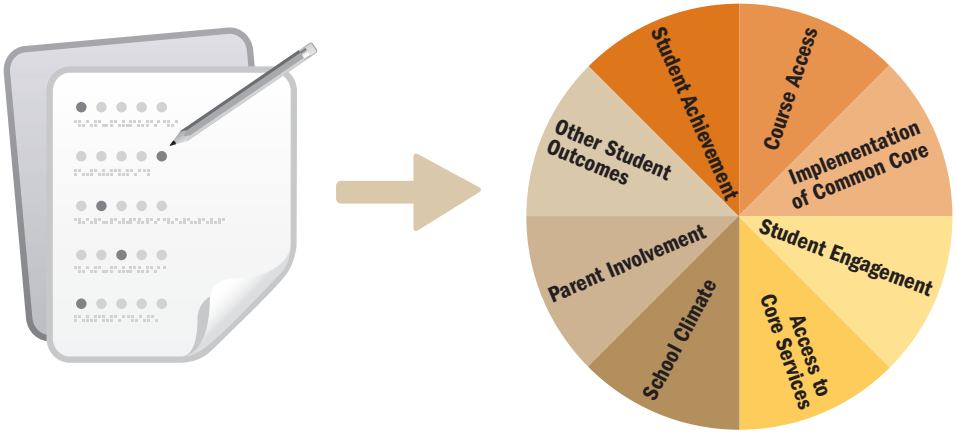
But what could have the greatest impact on the role of the API are the eight priority areas mandated by the reforms of California's school financing system (see figure below). Under this new system, the API is only one of seven measures of student achievement on which a school's effectiveness will be assessed, and only one of nearly two dozen criteria overall, most of which are unrelated to testing (such as parent involvement, student "engagement" and school climate).

NOTES

19 Interview of Ting Sung done by Richard Colvin for EdSource.

## *Toward broader measures of accountability*

**Districts will be held accountable not just for test scores, but also for results in eight priority areas.**




EdSource, 2013

California is thus moving in the direction of broadening the number of measures on which schools will be held accountable by parents, community members and other key stakeholders.

However, the state will face significant challenges in implementing a broader accountability system. A review by the RAND Corporation of multiple measures incorporated in accountability systems in 20 states concluded that little is known about their effectiveness. RAND researchers found:

> *There is almost no published research about the technical quality of the measures, the theories of action that instigated their adoption, the utility of the measures for promoting improved decision making, or the effects of the measures on school practice or student outcomes.*[20]

They also cautioned that:

> *Although the arguments in favor of expanded measures are strong, those responsible for setting policy or designing systems must proceed with caution and should be armed with an understanding of the various risks involved.*[21]

These risks include having so many measures that educators won't know where to focus their efforts, and that the system becomes so complex that it becomes harder for parents and others to get a sense of the quality of their schools. California may also find that getting results on these multiple measures will cost more than it is willing—or able—to pay.

NOTES

20 Schwartz, Heather, et al., *Expanded Measures of School Performance,* RAND Corporation, 2011.

21 Ibid.

## Funding reforms emphasize eight priority areas for schools

In their Local Control and Accountability Plans prescribed by California school funding reforms, school districts will be expected to focus on eight priority areas and set goals in each. The eight priority areas fall into three categories.

### Conditions of learning

- *Access to core services* as measured by the extent to which students are taught by fully credentialed teachers, have standards-aligned textbooks and materials, and attend classes in safe and clean facilities.
- *Implementation of the Common Core State Standards,* the *Next Generation Science Standards* and other academic standards.
- *Access to a broad course of study and programs* for high-needs and exceptional students. One measure will be enrollments in all courses required for admittance to California's public universities.

### Student outcomes

- *Student achievement* as measured by performance on standardized tests, the Academic Performance Index, the proportion of students who graduate "college and career ready," the proportion of English learners who are reclassified as fluent in English, the share of high school students who pass Advanced Placement course exams with a score of at least a 3 out of 5, and other measures.
- *Student outcomes* as measured by performance in other required areas of the school curriculum, such as physical education and the arts. *Other forms of assessments,* such as SAT or ACT college entrance examination scores, could also be included.

### Engagement

- *Student engagement* as measured by graduation and middle and high school dropout rates, chronic absenteeism and attendance.
- *Parent involvement* as measured by the extent to which parents participate in key school decisions.
- *School climate* as measured by suspension and expulsion rates, and other measures chosen by local school districts.

In reality, most school leaders and teachers are under pressure to meet the expectations of multiple constituency groups. How and whether these expectations can be formally integrated into a unified accountability system is another question altogether. As Chuck Weis, the former Santa Clara County superintendent of schools, has urged: "This is a great time to engage in a broader community conversation about what a high quality school looks like to these various constituency groups, and what indicators or measures can be collected to document that quality."

## Legislators call for college and career readiness measures in the Academic Performance Index

California is on track to reform the main measure of school performance, the Academic Performance Index, or API.

Senate Bill 1458 specifies that scores on standardized tests shall not comprise more than 60 percent of the high school Academic Performance Index.

It instructs the state superintendent of public instruction to come up with a plan to include other measures of a school's effectiveness in the API, such as indices of the college and career readiness of graduating students, the rates at which middle and high school students are promoted from one grade to the next, and high school graduation and drop-out rates.

The process of reforming the API is being carried out primarily through the 14-person Public School Accountability Act Advisory Committee, which meets quarterly. Every six months, the committee presents an interim report to the State Board of Education, with its final report due in May 2015. The State Board is slated to make a final decision on revisions of the API in July 2015.

To assist the committee, the California Department of Education has contracted with David Conley from the University of Oregon to help define what indices should be used to assess whether students leave schools ready for college and careers. These could include the number of students in Advanced Placement classes, students' SAT and ACT scores, and whether they are simultaneously enrolled in both high school and college courses (typically referred to as dual enrollment).

The law also authorizes the state superintendent to come up with alternatives to the current system of giving schools a decile ranking of 1 to 10 based on their API score relative to all schools in the state—yet another indicator of the unhappiness with the current assessment systems. These rankings are highly correlated with the income levels of a school's student population.

Adding to the unhappiness with the API is that even if a school's API score has increased substantially during the past dozen years, it can still get a lowly decile ranking compared to other higher-ranked schools whose scores have also risen. "By definition, no matter how well everyone does, 10 percent of schools will always be in the bottom decile," said Ed Haertel, a Stanford University education professor and a member of the Public Schools Accountability Act Advisory Committee.

*The key to having more local assessments would be to gather information that could be useful and contribute to improved outcomes, and not become just a bureaucratic—and ultimately useless—exercise.*

**ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLE #2:** ***From a system skewed toward top-down accountability imposed by Sacramento and Washington to one that incorporates local accountability and assessments.***

Gov. Brown has introduced a major new dimension into the testing and accountability debate by insisting that local schools and districts be more involved in evaluating their own performance than they have been in the recent past.

This marks a significant shift away from the testing and accountability systems that have been based on top-down edicts in the form of legislation from Sacramento or Washington. The NCLB law, in particular, represents the most significant attempt by the federal government to require schools to deviate from the principle of local control of education on which the nation's public school system was founded.

In a memorable veto[22] of an earlier version of Senate Bill 1458, authored by Senate President pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, Gov. Brown wrote:

> *A sign hung in Albert Einstein's office read, "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."... There are other ways to improve our schools—to indeed focus on quality. What about a system that relies on locally convened panels to visit schools, observe teachers, interview students and examine student work? Such a system wouldn't produce an API number, but it could improve the quality of our schools.*

NOTES

22 Gov. Jerry Brown's veto message, Oct. 1, 2011.

## Common Core State Standards will reshape California's testing and accountability systems

California has joined 44 other states and the District of Columbia in adopting the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics.[23] The goal of these standards, developed under the aegis of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, is to ensure that students will be ready for college-level courses or training programs for high-skill, high-wage careers by the time they graduate from high school. In particular, the standards place a strong emphasis on critical thinking skills and problem solving.

The standards are voluntary. School districts are not required to implement them, though they are required to administer the Smarter Balanced assessments, which are based on the standards. School districts have been preparing to teach to those standards by providing training opportunities for their teachers, developing new curricula, and purchasing appropriate hardware, software and other materials. But teacher preparation activities have varied enormously from one district to another, raising concerns that in many schools and districts teachers have not received the training necessary to effectively implement the Common Core standards.

One measure of the magnitude of the changes required is that California is giving school districts $1.25 billion over and above what they would have otherwise received to help them gear up for the new standards. All of that preparation must be done quickly because, beginning in spring 2014, students will take Smarter Balanced field tests based on the Common Core standards–and in the spring of 2015, they will take the full battery of tests for the first time.

NOTES

23 Frequently Asked Questions, Common Core State Standards Initiative website.

A year later, the notion of local review panels was incorporated into Senate Bill 1458, which gives the state superintendent of public instruction the authority to "develop and implement a program of school quality review," including the locally convened panels Gov. Brown referred to in his earlier veto.

The idea of locally convened panels is loosely based on the British system of "inspectorates," which was the subject of a report produced by Education Sector titled *On Her Majesty's School Inspection Service.*[24] The report asserted that:

> *Inspections offer a way to make much more nuanced judgments about school performance, provide richer information to parents and the public, offer better formative feedback to schools, inform much more targeted improvement and interventions for low-performing schools, and accelerate timelines for school improvement.*

The Education Sector report estimated that establishing an inspection service in California similar to the one that exists in the United Kingdom would require more than 800 inspectors, and would cost between $65 million and $130 million annually. Although these costs were far too high to consider during the budget crisis of the past several years, that may no longer be the case in light of the state's return to financial health.

The estimated costs could be significantly reduced if some of the inspectors were drawn from existing staff at county offices of education. Unlike in California, the United Kingdom does not have these intermediate education agencies that could play an important role in implementing an inspectorate-type program.

Although no state or district in this nation operates a comprehensive system like the one in place in the United Kingdom, similar efforts in the United States and California could provide a model that the state could build upon.

In 2006, New York City schools contracted with the English firm Cambridge Education to conduct two-day "School Quality Reviews" as part of its accountability system.[25] Since 2008, Ohio has conducted what it calls School Improvement Diagnostic Reviews. Twenty-four state officials conduct two-day site visits of "underperforming" schools. They identify the schools' strengths and weaknesses, and make a series of recommendations in the form of a "diagnostic report." Closer to home, Oakland has developed its own indigenous version of Cambridge's School Quality Review (see box on page 19).

A little-known provision of the No Child Left Behind law—Section 1117—prescribes "local support teams" to assist struggling schools, which could also be helpful in building the local input and evaluations Gov. Brown has in mind.

NOTES

24 Jerald, Craig, *On Her Majesty's School Inspection Services,* Education Sector, 2012.

25 See a detailed description of School Quality Reviews from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

This NCLB mandate has received almost no public attention in California and in most other states.

In response to this NCLB mandate—and the daunting task of trying to assist thousands of struggling schools after the passage of the NCLB law in 2002—California established a regional system of support based in county offices of education called a Statewide System of School Support, or S4. The goal was to build a district's capacity "to support low-performing schools."[26]

These support teams have been virtually invisible in the statewide and national reform debates. But an in-depth final evaluation conducted by the Human Resources Research Corporation (HumRRO) for the California Department of Education found "evidence throughout the state that S4 is contributing positively to district and school needs."[27]

Thus, school districts would not have to start from scratch in carrying out more local assessments should California move in this direction. The key would be to gather information that would be useful and contribute to improved outcomes, and not become just a bureaucratic—and ultimately useless—exercise.

NOTES

26 Provision in State Education Code 52059, Article 4.2.

27 Evaluation of the California Statewide System of School Support (S4): Final Report, Human Resources Research Organization, 2009.

## Oakland Unified reviews schools with local panels

Oakland Unified School District instituted a local evaluation program in 2011-12 that could serve as a model for other districts. It was prompted by the Cambridge School Quality Review approach, but with some significant differences.

In Oakland, reviews are carried out by "SQR" teams, consisting of specially trained principals and teachers from outside the schools. These reviews have so far been conducted in 52 schools. High school review teams sometimes also include high school students. The process begins with a "self reflection" report by the school to be reviewed, followed by an analysis of student outcome data. The SQR team then conducts a three-day site visit and holds a series of interviews, focus groups and meetings with students, families, community partners, teachers and administrators.

Schools are rated on 25 different standards. But David Chambliss, who runs the program and has the title of "director of Continuous School Improvement," said the process is about "continuous improvement, not a report card." Rather than coming up with specific recommendations, the review teams identify the "strengths" and "challenges" of a particular school.

Chambliss noted a big difference between Oakland's review teams and those of Cambridge Education, the inspiration for Oakland's model. Oakland's teams are indigenous to the district–not run by outside consultants. Cambridge's teams typically involve district staff but, Chambliss said, "the leaders of the teams are Cambridge folks, and ultimately the authors are the Cambridge folks."

This district-based approach has made a big difference in how the review teams are received by staff at local school sites. The goal is to engage schools in the process, rather than to set up an adversarial relationship with the review team. In addition, the district makes a conscious effort to involve parents in the process. Before the team arrives, they hold focus groups with parents. "We want to enlist them as partners to engage with us around our findings," he said.

A unique aspect of the program is that the district has set up a parallel review process for its central office operations, which is informed by issues raised by principals and others during the school reviews. This takes into account the reality–however uncomfortable it may be to school administrators–that how a school functions is affected in crucial ways by the effectiveness or efficiency of the district's central operations. According to Chambliss:

> *We are building a central office quality-review process on top of the School Quality Review. Hopefully, we get a top-to-bottom alignment. When you start reviewing schools, you quickly start uncovering the challenges you have in central services. School personnel know that data won't get lost, it is no longer anecdotal, and you are collecting systematic evidence across schools about central service quality. Ultimately that becomes a call-out of where you have excellence and where you don't.*

## Surveying parents, students and teachers: A key tool for local accountability

Getting input and observations of key local education constituencies—parents, students and school personnel—are an important dimension of local accountability.

In fact, the 2013 funding reform legislation (Assembly Bill 97) lists surveys of pupils, parents and teachers on their "sense of safety and school connectedness" as one way to measure "school climate" in their district's Local Control and Accountability Plan.[28]

At least five school districts—New York City, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, San Jose and Oakland—conduct surveys of parents, students and staff on a significant scale and incorporate their views into their accountability reports.

Only two states—Kentucky and Rhode Island—conduct surveys of all their schools. The TELL Kentucky survey is an annual 35- to 40-minute survey given to all teachers and principals. In 2013, some 43,000 teachers and principals responded—and 90 percent of Kentucky's schools met the 50 percent minimum response rate.

Rhode Island's SurveyWorks! initiative, conducted with help from WestEd, an education research organization, is more comprehensive. It surveys parents, teachers and students over a one-month period (in 2013 between Nov. 12 and Dec. 13, for example). Reports based on the survey are then given to each school through a program it calls Infoworks!.

The New York City School Survey, administered each year since 2007, is the largest survey in the nation except for the U.S. Census, and it is arguably even more ambitious. It polls 1.6 million parents, teachers and children in the sixth grade and up. Unlike the U.S. Census, which is conducted every decade, the New York survey is conducted annually.

Los Angeles Unified's School Experience Survey is especially relevant for California.

- Students are asked questions such as whether adults know their name, whether the school is clean, whether they feel safe while on campus, and whether what they are learning "takes a lot of thinking."
- Parents are asked questions like whether they "feel welcome to participate at school," whether they talk with teachers about their child's schoolwork, and whether they feel their children are safe.
- School site personnel weigh in on issues such as whether they get the help they need to communicate with parents and whether they are "proud" of their school.

The survey results are incorporated into a multicolored, multilingual, user-friendly report card that the district issues for each of its hundreds of schools. The report card, printed in a colorful 11- by 22-inch format, prominently incorporates views of parents, students and staff, based on their survey responses.

The report cards are easily accessed on the district's interactive web page. The report card for John Marshall High School, for example, underscores the usefulness of the survey in giving a more three-dimensional view of the school. The school had an Academic Performance Index of 685, way below the proficiency goal of 800 set by the state. Yet parents, teachers and students express a high degree of satisfaction with the school. If outsiders did not have access to that information, they would have an entirely different perception of the school.

One of the main challenges for the district has been getting a sufficient number of responses from parents so that survey results are statistically valid.

In the elementary grades, children were given the surveys to take home, which has worked reasonably well. The main challenge has been getting parents of middle and high school students to respond. In the past, surveys were mailed to parents' homes, but only about one in four parents responded. Instead of mailing the surveys, the district has boosted parent participation by sending them to middle and high schools, where school staff take responsibility for getting the surveys to parents, either by sending them home with students or by having parents fill out the surveys when they come to the school.

Because of cost constraints, it may be difficult, and in many cases impossible, for many school districts in the state to conduct surveys like the one in Los Angeles. But it does present a model that districts could adapt to fit their own purposes.

Other valuable surveys are the California School Climate Survey and the California Healthy Kids Survey, which the majority of California school districts receiving funds from the federal Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities program were required to administer between 2004 and 2009. Eighty-five percent of California's nearly 1,000 school districts participated in the surveys developed on behalf of the California Department of Education.

Because districts are no longer required to administer the surveys, the number of participating districts has currently dropped by about one-third from its previous levels. But the majority of California districts still do participate. The research firm WestEd has now consolidated the two surveys, along with a parent survey, into a three-part survey instrument called the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (CAL-SCHLS). The costs of administering the survey is relatively low because the California Department of Education underwrites it.

NOTES

28 Education Code Section 52066.

*"Computerized assessments allow teachers, principals and parents to receive results in weeks, not months. Faster results mean that teachers can use the information... throughout the school year to differentiate instruction and better meet the unique needs of their students."*

—SMARTER BALANCED ASSESSMENT CONSORTIUM

**ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLE #3:** ***From a system based on tests that provide delayed feedback and are used primarily to rank schools and districts with those that give more immediate feedback in ways that help children learn and teachers teach more effectively.***

A major drawback of the California Standards Tests that the state has administered for the past 16 years to students each spring is that they have provided little useful information to teachers, parents or students about individual students.

- Parents typically received their children's scores in the mail during the summer, without any explanation as to what they mean except whether the student is performing at a below basic, basic, proficient or advanced level.
- Parent and teachers received no breakdown as to the student's strengths or weaknesses or in what areas he or she could have benefitted from additional help.
- The tests have almost no meaning for students because they have no impact on their grades or whether they will be promoted to the next grade or graduate from high school.
- As a result, many students were not motivated to do well on the tests and may not have taken them seriously. This attitude, in turn, may have contributed to lower scores for individual students and the overall school and district.

In contrast, a major thrust of the Smarter Balanced assessments that students will take for the first time in 2015-16 will be to provide information that will be useful to teachers and that will help students understand more clearly their strengths and weaknesses.

Wherever feasible, students will be expected to take the new assessments using computers, providing rapid feedback to students and teachers. According to the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium:

> *Computerized assessments allow teachers, principals and parents to receive results in weeks, not months. Faster results mean that teachers can use the information from optional interim assessments throughout the school year to differentiate instruction and better meet the unique needs of their students.*

The assessments will themselves have three components: a **summative assessment, interim assessments** and **formative assessment** practices and strategies.

The summative assessment, as its name implies, is intended to measure the "sum" of what students have learned during the school year. As described by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, its purpose will be to provide "valid, reliable and fair measures of students' progress toward, and attainment of, the knowledge and skills required to be career and college ready."[29]

It will be administered during the last quarter of the school year and will consist of two parts: a "computer adaptive" component and "performance tasks."

NOTES

29 Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium website.

Photo courtesy of Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory

With **computer adaptive tests,** the computer program adjusts the level of difficulty of a question based on a student's response to the previous one. As the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium has explained:

> *By adapting to the student as the assessment is taking place, these assessments present an individually tailored set of questions to each student and can quickly identify which skills students have mastered. This approach represents a significant improvement over traditional paper-and-pencil assessments used in many states today, providing more accurate scores for all students across the full range of the achievement continuum.*[30]

**Performance tasks** are those that require an active response from students, rather than simply asking them to answer a multiple-choice question. So, for example, on the Smarter Balanced assessments, a student may be asked to supply an ending for a story, or to flesh out a paragraph on a topic such as why the school day should be longer. Smarter Balanced says that it is developing "automated technologies" to score written responses, and that items that can't be scored automatically will be evaluated by trained evaluators."[31]

Teachers will also be able to administer **optional interim assessments** at intervals still to be established by local schools and districts. These are intended to provide teachers "with actionable information" about student progress during the year. The goal of these interim assessments will be to help teachers, students and parents understand whether students are on track, and help them identify their strengths and weaknesses during the course of the year.

Finally, the new assessments will also encourage the use of **optional formative assessments**[32]—activities and assignments that are integrated into daily classroom instruction. They give teachers feedback as to how their students are doing and help students understand their strengths and weaknesses, and what areas of the curriculum they need to work on most.

If indeed the Smarter Balanced assessments include these three dimensions, they will represent a major advance on the once-yearly tests students currently take. Rather than simply providing information demonstrating whether a school is meeting federal or state mandates, educators will receive useful information to help drive a student's academic progress.

NOTES

30 Computer Adaptive Testing, Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium.

31 Sample Items and Performance Tasks, Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium.

32 "What is Formative Assessment?" July 12, 2012. Teach. Learn. Grow blog, Northwest Evaluation Association, Chicago 2012.

***"Most people are not actually motivated by rewards and punishments.... They're motivated by doing a good job. That's especially true in education."***

— LINDA DARLING-HAMMOND, PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION, STANFORD UNIVERSITY, AND CHAIR, CALIFORNIA COMMISSION ON TEACHER CREDENTIALING

**ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLE #4: *From a system that is primarily based on external rewards and punishments to one that builds in intrinsic incentives to motivate change among students, teachers and schools.***

This may be the most challenging principle to incorporate into California's emerging testing and accountability system—to motivate both students and teachers to do well, independent of the external rewards and sanctions that have characterized the state's accountability systems until now.

The central notion—argued, among others, by Michael Fullan, the Canadian educator and expert on organizational change—is that the rewards of acquiring knowledge and mastering skills will motivate students to succeed. Similarly for teachers, a system that is designed to help them experience success with their students will in the long run yield more impressive results.

These notions are diametrically opposed to the main approach of the No Child Left Behind law. As Heinrich Mintrop and Gail Sunderman noted in their paper for The Civil Rights Project at UCLA, *Why High Stakes Accountability Sounds Good, but Doesn't Work:*

> *The federal accountability system, made universal through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, is at its heart a quota and sanctions system. This system stipulates the progression of underperforming schools through a set of increasingly severe sanctions based on meeting performance quotas for specific demographic groups.*[33]

That approach to testing and accountability, argues Linda Darling-Hammond, the Stanford educator who is also chair of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, will not yield the results the system is seeking. As she said in an interview with EdSource:

> *Most people are not actually motivated by rewards and punishments, although those can produce various kinds of behaviors that try to drive people in a given direction. They're motivated by doing a good job. That's especially true in education. When you prepare people well and support them in a collaborative organization for ongoing learning, then you're actually providing the grit for a high level of commitment and intrinsic motivation because people are more efficacious when they are well prepared, and if they feel they can succeed. That drives higher commitment and motivation to succeed.*[34]

Ideally, the motivation to do well on tests would start with motivating students themselves. Yet, discussion of how to incorporate strategies to motivate students to do better has been mostly absent from the national reform agenda. Instead, the major focus has been on getting adults to help students do better.

NOTES

33 Mintrop, Heinrich and Gail Sunderman. *Why High Stakes Accountability Sounds Good, But Doesn't Work,* The Civil Rights Project, UCLA, April 2009.

34 Interview with EdSource, October 2013.

As a paper by the Center on Education Policy, *Student Motivation: An Overlooked Piece of School Reform,* pointed out:

> *Motivation is a central part of a student's education experience, but it has received scant attention amid an education reform agenda focused mainly on accountability, standards and tests, teacher quality, and school management.*[35]

The paper defines two kinds of motivation:

1. **Extrinsic motivation** "is the desire to do or achieve something not so much for the enjoyment of the activity itself, but because it will produce a certain result."
2. **Intrinsic motivation** is "the desire to do or achieve something because one truly wants to and takes pleasure in doing it."

Some schools and districts have tried to stimulate students' "extrinsic motivation" by offering external rewards, such as pizza coupons or even cash incentives in exchange for getting better grades, reading more books or doing well on tests. However, these incentives have produced limited results, according to the Center for Education Policy's report:

> *The most important conclusion is that reward programs that get the most results are ones that focus on mastery—demonstrating more understanding, skills and content knowledge—not on performance-based goals, such as having students reach a pre-defined goal (such as a score or a grade).*

For Michael Fullan, fostering intrinsic motivation among students is an essential ingredient in any effective accountability system. Fullan's ideas are at the center of the reforms being implemented by the eight California school districts that received a No Child Left Behind waiver.[36]

In a critique of the Common Core standards and the Smarter Balanced assessments, he wrote:

> *There is no way that these ambitious and admirable nationwide goals will be met with the strategies being used. No successful system in the world has ever led with these drivers. They cannot generate on a large scale the kind of intrinsic motivational energy that will be required to transform these massive systems.*

Extrinsic motivation has its place, but only in combination with intrinsic rewards, he argues. "People will do things longer and deeper if it is intrinsically meaningful to them; if it is extrinsically useful, they might do it for a while, but not for that long," he asserted in an interview with EdSource.

NOTES

35 Usher, Alexander and Nancy Kober. *Student Motivation: An Overlooked Piece of School Reform,* Center on Education Policy, May 2012.

36 Fullan, Michael. *Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform,* Centre for Strategic Education Seminar Series, Paper No. 204, May 2011.

Photo by Susan Frey

Even trying to convince students that they must do well in school—and on tests—so that they will be able to go to college has its limits. "The prospect of going to college will motivate some people, but it won't last until there is some deeper meaning," he said.

The larger challenge, said Fullan, is to tackle the problem of bored kids. "The goal is how to move from boredom to excitement about learning," he said.

Then there is the challenge of fostering intrinsic motivation among teachers. What they need, Fullan said, is to experience success with their students by using what he calls the social capital of a school—working collaboratively with other teachers, principal and staff, and making use of their experience and insights. He pointed to districts such as Sanger Unified in the Central Valley, Garden Grove Unified south of Anaheim, and Long Beach Unified as promoting such a culture within their schools. Said Fullan:

> *Whether you do it via other teachers helping, or principals and literacy coaches, you want to give teachers new skills and new experiences that get successes like they have never had before; and as a result of that, their intrinsic motivation kicks in.*

Integrating the concepts of internal "drivers" of change and how best to motivate teachers into discussions of testing and accountability presents significant challenges. But looking afresh at strategies that educators have routinely used to motivate students,[37] and then figuring out how to introduce them into the broader arena of testing, could yield significant dividends, Fullan contended.

> *When teachers get turned on, there is tremendous motivation and energy that goes into their work. It is something you can't buy or can't get through 'accountability.' The goal is to turn that around, so it is worthwhile going to school for both teachers and students.*

Stanford's Darling-Hammond agrees:

> *If teachers get good information about how well they're doing and how well their students are doing, and they're working in a learning organization, they'll then also build on that and continue to improve their practice. I think we have a lot of evidence that that is how people in education are motivated to do well.*

The reforms initiated by the Local Control Funding Formula should move the state further in this direction. Instead of punitive sanctions, the new accountability system is designed to provide schools with the support they need to improve. An entirely new state agency, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, will be established to provide such support. Even in the case of "persistently failing schools," the new agency must first have provided assistance and must indicate that state intervention is still necessary.

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37 Hunter, Phyllis S. *Raising Students Who Want to Read,* Scholastic Professional Paper.

*California has taken an important step forward by including the Next Generation Science Standards as one of the priorities that districts need to address. But the challenge remains to develop the curriculum, instructional materials and assessments to match the new standards.*

**ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLE #5:** ***From a system that focuses disproportionately on math and English language arts to a more balanced one that incorporates other key subject areas, especially science.***

President Barack Obama has made science a central part of his education agenda. As he declared at the White House Science Fair in April 2013:

> *We need to make this a priority to train an army of new teachers in these subject areas, and to make sure that all of us as a country are lifting up these subjects for the respect that they deserve.*[38]

California is taking a leadership role in being one of the early adopters of the Next Generation Science Standards.

But that cannot obscure the fact that math and English language arts have dominated the curriculum and assessment landscape for the past decade and a half—to the detriment of other key subject areas including science, history/social science, music, arts and physical education.

Several reports during the past decade by the Center for Education Policy have found that, especially in underperforming schools, these key areas of the school curriculum have been trimmed as schools have been forced to focus intensively on math and English language arts.

Because the most energy and resources have been invested in developing new science standards and work has begun on assessments, this report focuses on science. But that does not diminish the importance of elevating the status of other parts of the school curriculum as well.

In terms of California's emerging accountability system, science assessments have taken a back seat to those in math and English language arts. Under NCLB, science tests were required to be administered only once within each of K-5, 6-9 and 10-12 grade spans—and in California, they have been administered at grades 5, 8 and 10. (There have also been end-of-course, single-subject standards tests in high school biology, chemistry, earth science and physics.)

Some progress is being made in the Common Core standards, which encourage integrating science (and history/social science) standards and curriculum with those in math and English language arts.[39]

But the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, which is developing math and English language arts assessments, is not doing so explicitly for science. Unlike the massive federal investment in both the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment for Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) development of math and English language arts assessments for the Common Core, there has been no comparable federal investment in science assessments.

Meanwhile, the state of science education remains a source of enormous concern to a broad range of educators and stakeholders.

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38 The 2013 White House Science Fair, April 2013.

39 For example, McMurrer, Jennifer. *Choices, Changes and Challenges: Curriculum and Instruction in the NCLB Era,* Center for Education Policy, April 2007.

Also, McMurren, Jennifer. *Instructional Time in Elementary Schools: A Closer Look at Changes for Specific Subjects,* Center for Education Policy, February 2008.

Here is one influential critique from the National Academy of Engineering:

> *The U.S. science curriculum is 'a mile wide and an inch deep,' covering a large number of topics in a scattershot, shallow fashion rather than systematically and in depth. These features are evident both in state and district standards and in textbooks (another important influence on the curriculum). The U.S. science curriculum stands in stark contrast to that of other nations, in particular high-achieving ones such as Japan.*[40]

Similarly, the National Research Council's Committee on a Conceptual Framework for New K-12 Science Education Standards found that:

> *Currently, K-12 science education in the United States...is not organized systematically across multiple years of school, emphasizes discrete facts with a focus on breadth over depth, and does not provide students with engaging opportunities to experience how science is actually done.*[41]

Two years ago, a National Academy of Sciences panel called on "state, national, and local policymakers ...to elevate science education in grades K-12 to the same level of importance as reading and mathematics."[42]

That has not yet occurred.

California has taken an important step forward by including the Next Generation Science Standards as one of the priorities that districts (including charter schools) need to address as part of the Local Control and Accountability Plan they must draw up by July 1, 2014.

But the challenge remains to develop the curriculum, instructional materials and assessments to match the new standards. It will be several years before all these components are in place.

In March 2014, the California Department of Education began to put together a team of about 25 key science education leaders in California and two liaisons from the State Board of Education. The team will develop an implementation plan that lays out what must done during the next three to four years to fully implement the science standards statewide. The implementation plan will be presented to the State Board of Education for approval at the July 2014 meeting.

Developing quality assessments will be particularly challenging. A summary of two days of meetings of more than 200 experts brought together by the Education Testing Service and the College Board in September 2013 concluded on this salutary note:

> *As made clear by many speakers, translating the Next Generation Science Standards to assessments presents numerous challenges, particularly for the design of consequential assessments if current constraints of testing time, cost and uses of data are to be adhered to.*[43]

This spring, California students will take Common Core field tests developed by the Smarter Balanced Consortium. But the tests will only be in math and English language arts. California will continue to administer the California

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40 Schmidt, William, Nathan Burroughs, and Lee Cogan. *On the Road to Reform: K-12 Science Education in the United States,* The Bridge on STEM Education: Progress and Prospects, Spring 2013.

41 A Framework for K-12 Science Education, National Research Council, 2012.

42 Successful K-12 STEM Education: Identifying Effective Approaches in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, National Academy of Sciences, June 2011.

43 Invitational Research Symposium on Science Assessments, Sept. 24-25, 2013, Washington D.C.

Standards Test in science, as required by federal law, in grades 5, 8 and 10. The existing single-subject, end-of-course high school CSTs in biology, chemistry, earth science and physics will be terminated.

"We are in a holding pattern," said Chris Roe, president of the California STEM Learning Network, referring to the continuing use of California's old tests in some grades and the absence of new ones in any grade. "California is stuck between a rock and a hard place. Until there is something else in place, we don't have much choice."

What is not clear is whether California will need to develop its own assessments or whether the state can be part of a consortium, such as the national Smarter Balanced Consortium for English and math.

The federal government, which supported the effort to create two national consortia for math and English, has so far shown no interest in supporting the development of science assessments. California is informally discussing working together with Western states, including Washington, Oregon and Nevada, according to Phil Lafontaine, director of the Professional Learning Support Division at the California Department of Education.

"It doesn't make sense to do it on our own," he told EdSource, "but right now it's just a lot of conversations—no formal agreements."

Lafontaine said it is unclear when new science assessments will be available. "It's up in the air right now," he said, adding that the department is eager for the new assessments to be implemented, but "we want there to be time to do it well."

Generating public support for the new science standards could play a role in both their quality and how quickly they are implemented. As the California STEM Learning Network in concert with other organizations have noted: "It is essential that education, business, parent and community leaders become informed about the Next Generation Science Standards and make their desires known to policymakers."

An editorial in *Science,* co-authored by Jane Coffey from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, and Bruce Alberts, the magazine's editor-in-chief, says the involvement of scientists in the process is crucial.

> *Urgently needed is a vigorous R&D agenda that pursues new methods of and approaches to assessment. This will be difficult but critically important long-term work. Outstanding scientists must be willing to work side-by-side with measurement specialists and science educators to develop methods for evaluating what is important to measure.*[44]

Trish Williams, a State Board of Education liaison to the science standards implementation team, said the board will work to ensure a "robust implementation" of the science standards. "We are committed to California becoming a national leader in science education," she said.

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44 Education Code Section 52052.9, based on Senate Bill 1458, reads as follows: *On or before October 1, 2013, the Superintendent shall report to the Legislature and recommend to the state board for adoption a method or methods for increasing the emphasis on pupil mastery of standards in science and social science through the system of public school accountability or by other means.*

*The new accountability system should encourage schools to challenge all students, no matter how accomplished, to continue stretching themselves academically, while not losing sight of the need to narrow gaps in achievement between different groups of students.*

**ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLE #6:** ***From a system that has focused mainly on getting children to perform at a "proficient" level to one that measures student growth from year to year, motivates all children to do better, and rewards students and schools for making progress.***

The major thrust of both the federal No Child Left Behind law and the Public Schools Accountability Act has been to focus on children who are *not* succeeding, rather than rewarding those who are. On the whole, the same approach has applied to schools.

There are no explicit incentives in NCLB for schools to improve the academic performance of students after they have scored at a proficient level on state tests, or of students who were already at an "advanced" level. The same applies to the state system—after schools and their student subgroups reach the 800 API target, they are no longer subject to the accountability provisions of the Public Schools Accountability Act.

Clearly, most educators want all students under their care to perform at optimal levels. But it was not a goal built into the accountability systems.

A new accountability system should hold all schools accountable for the academic success of all students regardless of socioeconomic status, race, community type (urban, suburban, rural), and language and disability status. The system should encourage schools to challenge all students, no matter how accomplished, to continue stretching themselves academically, while not losing sight of the need to narrow gaps in achievement between different groups of students.

One way to build in a goal that all children—and the schools that serve them—improve over time is to move to a system that measures actual growth of individual students, in place of the current system that measures how this year's 3rd grade class, for example, compares to last year's 3rd grade class, regardless of whatever demographic or other differences might exist between the two classes.

Fortunately, the new assessments that schools will begin administering this spring will move California in this direction. Paul Warren, in a PPIC paper titled *California's Changing K-12 Accountability System,* points out that the Smarter Balanced assessments will use a "common scale" for the English and math tests in grades 3 through 8, which will allow California to measure the annual growth of individual students.[45]

Because each student in California has a unique student identifier as part of a longitudinal tracking system (the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System or CALPADS), it is now possible for California to move from a "fixed target" model of accountability like the one embodied in No Child Left Behind to a "growth-based" one that can actually track student performance over time.[46]

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45 Warren, Paul, *California's Changing K-12 Accountability System,* Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), January 2013.

46 Loeb, Susanna, et al., *Building an Information System to Support Continuous Improvement in California Public Schools,* Policy Analysis for California Education, February 2008.

However, to make that happen the state must still figure out how to integrate student growth measures with student test results in its accountability system. In other words, what growth targets—the improvement that students must make from one year to the next—will schools and districts have to show to demonstrate they are succeeding?

Several states, such as Illinois, have established accountability systems using growth targets based on scores of individual students.[47] However, even in those states, growth is still only rewarded until students score at an advanced level or, as in Illinois' case, they have "exceeded standards." After students reach the "exceeds standards" level, the system makes no provision for rewarding them if they improve their scores.

Setting growth targets in California's emerging accountability system will require legislative action. State officials point out that in order to see what kinds of progress students make on the new Smarter Balanced assessments from one year to the next, it makes sense to wait until the assessments have been administered for two years, and only then to recommend new growth targets. These targets should incorporate ways to motivate students already scoring at an advanced level to do even better.

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47 National Education Association, *Growth Models—An Update on the Effectiveness of Determining Student Progress and School Accountability*, 2009.

*California seems to be heading away from coming up with a single grade, index or score, and moving toward a more multidimensional accountability system. But it will take considerable work to figure out how to present information and data in a way that is accessible and useful for everyone.*

**ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLE #7:** ***From a complex testing and accountability system that is hard for ordinary Californians to understand to one that is more transparent, and presents a multidimensional portrait of how students and their schools are doing over time in straightforward language.***

California's accountability system has been based largely on whether a school has met its target "growth measures" on the Academic Performance Index, a single number based mainly on how students do on California Standards Tests, and on whether a school is achieving adequate yearly progress or is in need of Program Improvement as defined by the federal No Child Left Behind law.

At first glance, the API may seem like a simple score that ranks a school on a scale of 200 to 1,000. But the API is in fact a complicated and not very transparent measure of school performance, as even a cursory glance at the annual California Department of Education manual explaining it will demonstrate. Few people who use the API know how it is reached, or what it really means. The same applies to knowing how a school is determined to have made "adequate yearly progress" under the No Child Left Behind law. The AYP determination is based on how multiple student subgroups have performed on any number of tests, how many students have reached proficiency levels, and how many students have taken the tests.

It would be safe to say that most parents would not know a school can be deemed to have failed to make "adequate yearly progress" simply because less than 95 percent of students in any one of numerous subgroups failed to take the test. Even if just a handful of students in any subgroup don't take the test, the entire school can be deemed not to have made adequate progress.

Another issue that California has not addressed head-on is that there are multiple constituencies to which schools must be held accountable for their performance—taxpayers, legislators, parents, educators, employers and students—and that different audiences need information presented in different ways.

- Employers and business leaders need to know if students are emerging prepared for college and careers.
- Parents need to know if their children are being taught effectively and are expected to meet high academic standards.
- Taxpayers need to know their tax dollars are getting results.
- Lawmakers need to know that schools are using state and federal funds in the ways they were intended, and are implementing state mandates and reforms in an effective fashion.
- Educators in and outside the classroom need information that is actionable, timely and gives them guidance as to the changes they need to make to ensure that the children in their care achieve at optimal levels.

California education stakeholders have not engaged in an open discussion about how they want the quality of a school or district to be assessed.

There is the appeal of generating a single score or index (such as the API), a grade such as the ones awarded to schools in Florida and New York City, or even a more multilayered percentage score such as the School Quality Improvement Index proposed by the CORE consortium of eight California districts. But there are also clearly advantages to schools or districts being evaluated on multiple measures, such as the eight "priority areas" prescribed by the Local Control Funding Formula legislation.

The risk is that California will attempt to come up with a single measure that cannot possibly encapsulate the multidimensional aspects of a complex institution like a school or district. At the same time, providing too much information on too many measures can confuse and obscure what is going on in a school or district. That is what has occurred with the School Accountability Report Card (or SARC) mandated by Proposition 98, the initiative approved by voters in 1988.

The SARCs were intended to be useful documents that would allow the public to hold schools accountable for the expenditure of state funds—and for getting results. But over the years, they have turned into lengthy, often inscrutable documents weighted down by additional reporting requirements mandated by subsequent legislation. In many cases, they are simply public relations documents intended to put schools in the best possible light.

California seems to be heading away from coming up with a single grade, index or score, and moving toward a more multidimensional accountability system. But it will take considerable work to figure out how to present information and data in a way that is accessible and useful for everyone.

It would be worthwhile to look at how other states present outcomes on multiple measures—such as Colorado's SchoolView, New York State's Report Cards, and New York City's Progress Report Overview. These could be used to inform a new and much more simplified approach to presenting information in California. The School Quality Snapshot produced by the California Department of Education and the School Report Cards produced by Los Angeles Unified are both good models to build on.

California would also benefit from engaging stellar graphic designers and data visualization experts to come up with new ways to provide information that present meaningful and understandable portraits of a school's quality.

*If technology allows students to learn at their own pace—and advance more quickly—the "one size fits all" standardized tests should become far less central to the accountability system.*

**ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLE #8:** ***From an assessment system that uses technology mainly to report results to schools and the public to one that uses technology in innovative ways to provide more immediate feedback to teachers and students, and that tracks students' progress through the 12th grade and into college and the workplace.***

Because of California's leadership in the high-tech world, and the creative energies and industry of Silicon Valley in particular, the state's public schools should be the beneficiary of technological advances that could be applied to new assessment and accountability systems.

Clearly, the goal of the computer-adaptive Smarter Balanced assessments—to allow students to move to easier or more demanding questions depending on how they respond to each question—would represent a major advance in the application of technology to assessments.

What remains unclear is how many schools will have both the broadband capacity and the computer hardware to administer the Smarter Balanced assessments in their online versions, and how many will have to administer them in more traditional pencil-and-paper formats.

Beyond administration of the Smarter Balanced assessments, successful applications of technology could be a key to transforming our current testing and accountability system as we know it. This transformation could make it possible to cut back sharply on testing simply for accountability purposes—the big annual "summative" tests students are now required to take—because there will be a continual stream of information about student learning available throughout the year.

Some distinguished education leaders question the necessity of having millions of students take tests for accountability purposes every year. In a recent *Education Week* article, Marc Tucker, president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, Linda Darling-Hammond, chair of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, and John Jackson, president of the Schott Foundation for Public Education, argue that standardized tests should be administered to just one grade at the elementary, middle and high school levels.[48]

In place of annual tests, they argue, schools could use "higher quality assessments that encourage more productive teaching, while reducing the testing burden on students and teachers."

> *The countries that outperform the United States on international exams spend more than we do to measure and encourage these skills with essay tests and teacher-scored projects. And they can afford to do this because they test much less frequently than we do, typically only two or three times during a student's entire school career.*

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48 "Fewer, better tests can boost achievement," *Education Week*, Oct. 7, 2013.

Technology should make it possible to reduce the need for annual tests because teachers and students who are working online are able to get far more rapid—even instant—feedback on what they are doing. Already, teachers in many classrooms are giving students feedback as they are writing or completing assignments using tools like Google docs. Students are doing quizzes online and getting instant feedback and suggestions for what they can do to improve their performance. Using tools like PowerSchool, students and their parents can get access to their scores and grades on tests and quizzes shortly after they take them.

As more instruction gets delivered online, online programs will present classroom curriculum lessons that marry learning and assessment, with students and teachers getting ongoing real-time feedback.

In addition, technology will also allow schools to move toward what educators call a *competency-based system*, in which students advance when they have demonstrated competence or mastery in the knowledge expected by state and local standards. In other words, they can take tests and assessments throughout the school year to demonstrate that they have the necessary knowledge rather than having to wait to have their abilities tested at a fixed time every year, typically in the spring.

As the California Department of Education's Deb Sigman has argued:

> *We want assessments to be a way to promote teaching and learning. We want them to be an extension of teaching, not as an add in and drop in at some point during the year when students stop what they are doing and take an assessment that doesn't look like what they have been doing in the classroom. We want assessments to look like what they have been doing all year round.*[49]

As a result, technology must necessarily be a core feature of any reformed accountability system, with potentially far-reaching impacts on the accountability system itself. If technology allows students to learn at their own pace—and advance more quickly—the "one size fits all" standardized tests administered annually in specific grades should become far less central to the accountability system than they have been in the past.

At the same time, the capacity of schools and districts to use technology effectively will vary enormously. The state must ensure that school districts without the resources to take advantage of the opportunities presented by technology in general, and educational technology in particular, are not left behind when it comes to effecting these transformations.

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49 Comments at Policy Analysis for Public Education Seminar, Sacramento, Oct. 2, 2013.

*"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."*

– WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS, QUOTED BY GOV. JERRY BROWN, 2013 STATE OF THE STATE SPEECH

# CONCLUSION

What should be clear from this report is that the there are many strands and levels in the path toward establishing a new testing and accountability system—especially one that incorporates multiple measures and charts new territory by placing a priority on local involvement in evaluating school outcomes.

One challenge is the sheer scale on which it must be done—in a state with nearly 1,000 districts, 10,000 schools and more than 6 million public school students—and the massive amount of data that represents.

Another challenge is how to balance the development of a uniform testing and accountability system against the diversity of the state's schools, geography and population.

Yet another is how to move from a single score—the Academic Performance Index, which has been at the heart of the state's accountability system—to one that assesses students on "deeper learning" skills that go beyond what can be tested by multiple-choice questions. What's more, California must still develop new assessments in core subject areas such as science, history and social science, and the arts.

To ensure success, there needs to be clear oversight of the process, and a way to manage the competing interests and complexities that are at play.

It will also be important to ensure that the essential principles outlined in this report are incorporated into the new system, underscoring the need for ongoing oversight.

If changes are required—including legislative ones—these need to be made early on in the process. For example, it may make sense to revisit Senate Bill 1458, which mandates reforms in the Academic Performance Index. The bill was approved before the passage of legislation (Assembly Bill 97) reforming the state's school finance system. As a consequence, the Academic Performance Index is only one of many measures that will be part of the state's emerging accountability system.

Now that parents, community representatives, teachers and administrators are required to be involved in recommending how state funds must be spent, a way for these local stakeholders to be included in reviewing the success or otherwise of the emerging accountability system must also be established.

Their feedback will be crucial in helping to assess whether the new system ends up providing the information needed to contribute to better student outcomes, which ultimately is the goal of any testing and accountability system.

It is also important to remember that the larger function of public schools should not be to simply prepare young people to do well on tests, which has been the major focus of accountability systems during the past decade and a half. It should be to let their talents—whatever they may be—flourish. Gov. Brown

Photo by Susan Frey

has also emphasized the school's role in "character formation"—an aspect of the educational experience that can't be measured on tests. While standards are "fundamentally important," he told the State Board of Education shortly after he took office in January 2011, "I really value creativity, innovation, the unusual, the alive, the vital."

California's emerging testing and accountability system must be aligned with these broader goals of schooling. But what is clear is that after more than a decade of implementing top-down assessments that have failed to deliver on their promises, California now has the opportunity to take the lead in the nation in coming up with a system that not only fairly and accurately measures student and school performance, but also helps contribute to better teaching and learning.

In order to make this happen, we recommend the following steps.

- **Publish a clear timeline:** The California Department of Education in concert with the State Board of Education should publish a clear timeline for all key milestones, and distribute it widely to policymakers, parent and community organizations, school board members, and other education stakeholders to ensure that all major stakeholders are informed about the complex process for reforming the testing and accountability system.
- **Establish broader oversight:** The State Board of Education should consider appointing an individual or group to oversee and coordinate the process and ensure that the necessary steps occur in a timely fashion, while still meeting the needs of students, schools and the state in general. Without overall coordination, there is a danger that the various elements of the new testing and accountability system will evolve in an uncoordinated fashion—and in potentially conflicting ways.
- **Promote dialog on the role of testing:** The State Board of Education should initiate a statewide dialog about the role of testing in the state's emerging accountability system and the best way to evaluate a school's performance. This will be especially important as California moves away from its reliance on the Academic Performance Index as the primary way to evaluate school performance to one incorporating multiple measures as spelled out in school finance legislation and the Local Control and Accountability Plan that it mandates.
- **Engage in a deliberative process:** Policymakers must move deliberately to put into place a new testing and accounting system—without doing so in an overly hasty fashion that yields unintended consequences. Because key pieces of California's accountability system need only be in place in 2015-16, policymakers have time to be discerning in crafting a coordinated strategy that builds on the best approaches being developed within California and in other states.

Photo by Susan Frey

- **Develop new science assessments:** Development of new science assessments is lagging behind those developed for English language arts and math. Educators concerned about developing meaningful assessments in science should be encouraged to participate in stakeholder discussions that will be launched in the next several months. Key stakeholders in business, academia and public policy have the opportunity to play a greater leadership role at a crucial time in not only ensuring that frameworks, curricula and assessments tied to the Next Generation Science Standards are developed in a timely way, but also in elevating the status of science within the school curriculum.
- **Conduct an ongoing review:** After the key parts of the system are in place, a mechanism for continual review of the reforms must be instituted to ensure that they are meeting the needs of educators. The review mechanism must also provide educators with meaningful information about their students that contributes to greater academic success. Also, parents and other community stakeholders should have a way to be involved in the statewide review process, paralleling their involvement at a local level. Ongoing review and oversight will be especially critical because of the system's reliance on technology, which will inevitably undergo major changes as the system is being implemented.
- **Provide adequate resources:** While students and schools must be held accountable for achieving results, the state must provide the resources necessary for them to do so. The provision of the $1.25 billion to school districts to implement the Common Core State Standards and the establishment of the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence that were intended to provide support services to schools are positive steps in this direction. But California schools in general remain underfunded compared to most other states. There needs to be a mechanism to monitor the resources and funding available to districts and to make recommendations to the Legislature to ensure that districts have the resources to successfully implement the new testing and accountability system described in this report.

Reforming California's assessment and accountability system is a task that presents enormous challenges and pitfalls, but it is one that also is essential for the state to undertake as it prepares its young people for a future that neither their teachers, nor they, can fully anticipate—but must embrace.

## *About EdSource*

*EdSource is an independent, impartial, nonprofit organization established in 1977. EdSource's mission is to engage Californians on key education challenges and to highlight strategies that promote student success.*

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