



# THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

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## **“No Excuses” vs. Acknowledging Reality**

By UCLA IDEA

Is California education improving, failing, or just hanging on? On Monday, the state released the results of California's Academic Performance Index, or API. The numbers showed slight improvement over last year with almost half of California's public schools—46 percent—reaching the target of 800 on a 1,000-point scale. Overall, the state scored 767, a 13-point gain from the previous year.

At the same time, more California schools than last year failed to achieve the No Child Left Behind Act's standard of “Adequate Yearly Progress,” or AYP. Out of about 6,100 schools that receive federal funds for low-income students, 3,197 didn't meet their AYP goal. AYP is a measure of improvements from one year to the next in the proportion of students scoring proficient in math and English Language Arts. Unlike California's API, the federal AYP is a moving target, with schools expected to continuously increase the percentage of students scoring proficient until reaching 100 percent.

What do these tests and accountability measures reveal about the state's education progress? Neither the API nor the AYP tell much about improvement of California schools outside the context of some other telling data. Two examples give a snapshot of the bigger challenge.

Even before the deep cuts of the last two years, California ranked near the bottom in the amount it spends on students. Using a new formula to adjust for cost-of-living differences across states, EdSource estimates that in 2007-08, the state spent \$8,853 while the rest of the nation averaged more than \$10,000 (Other cost adjustment formulas place California even lower in national rankings). Further, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the rate of Americans living in poverty in 2009 was the highest since 1994. The poverty rate was 14.3 percent last year as 3.8 million people increased the ranks of the poor in the country for a total of 43.6 million.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell argued that budget cuts over the last two years have required schools to do more with less. At the release of the slightly improved API numbers earlier this week, he said, “We could see greater improvement if our schools were fully funded... We're shortchanging our schoolchildren today”.

During his back-to-school speech, President Obama urged students to work hard and said, if they did, then nothing would be beyond their reach. Such encouragement is good, but not enough; and, it can have its downside. A lot of Americans are ready to seize on this “you-can-do-it” sentiment to blame poor schooling outcomes on students (and parents and teachers) who simply didn't work hard enough. Yet we know that in schools and communities there are millions who are working desperately hard every day, and there is still much that is beyond their reach.

When addressing education policy, education leaders, including the president, must expose the painful realities that diminish students' success. These are risky truths to tell because many believe that acknowledging the role of underfunded schools and student poverty is simply making excuses for low performance. But, as a New York University education professor Pedro Noguera said recently, “acknowledging this reality is not the same thing as making excuses for failure.”