



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Oct. 11 - 15, 2010

Adding Transparency to Accountability

By UCLA IDEA

*Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.
-Daniel Patrick Moynihan*

Shortly before signing the budget last week, Gov. Schwarzenegger vetoed almost \$1 billion in spending, including \$20 million that would have gone toward developing the state's data-tracking system.

The California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System, known as CALPADS, would gather student test scores, demographic data, enrollment, teacher assignments, and data on student movement in and out of school districts, essentially tracking students from kindergarten to high school graduation.

In short, the longitudinal database could help make sense of the state's educational landscape, better identify its problems, and inform efforts to improve student achievement. The governor's veto continues the state's difficulty in achieving a useful data system. In addition to funding problems, the system has been beleaguered by technical glitches and implementation issues at district levels.

The inability to access relevant information about schools runs counter to the near-constant complaints about lack of educational accountability and transparency. The recent furor over the Los Angeles Times' publishing flimsy assessments of some teachers' "effectiveness" is just a more recent example of how demands for superficial transparency can cause more harm than good.

Wide-ranging data about all publicly-funded schools, including ready and appropriate access to that information would inform participation by all stakeholders—students, parents, teachers, administrators, political officials and community members. Without *full* transparency (as compared to serving up whatever information is convenient), all sorts of misleading claims can turn school data into tools for political jockeying rather than educational improvement.

For example, charter schools are not required to share as much data as public schools. Sometimes, the public's understanding of charters is skewed by self-reported data from charters that exaggerate their effectiveness. Financial scandals in some Los Angeles charters might have been avoided if responsible stakeholders had earlier access to seeing how the education money was spent. Assemblywoman Brownley's AB 572, vetoed by the governor last month, would have held charter schools to the same open-meeting and public records standards required of other legislative bodies, like school boards, in California. As a result of that veto, the public cannot fairly evaluate the relative effectiveness and efficiency of the charter school model actually implemented in their communities.

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A comprehensive and democratic accountability system requires more than spotty data in the hands of a limited number of the most powerful people. The system needs to have necessary data such as provided by CALPADS; the system must guarantee that the data will be used responsibly; data must be accessible to multiple audiences; and the system must operate with open processes.

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