



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Jan. 16-20, 2011

Brown: "I Believe it is Time to Reduce the Number of Tests"

By UCLA IDEA

In his State of the State address Wednesday, Gov. Jerry Brown acknowledged "the house of education is divided by powerful forces and strong emotions." Nowhere have those forces and emotions stirred more distraction and waste than in the passion for high-stakes standardized testing.

Brown spoke of local control and his belief that schools and districts know best how to help students by using assessments wisely: "To me that means, we should set broad goals and have a good accountability system, leaving the real work to those closest to the students." Brown noted that standardized tests—which are not local, but statewide or national—could draw attention and resources from local decisions and teaching. The governor wants to dial down the disproportionate energies spent on tests: "I believe it is time to reduce the number of tests and get the results to teachers, principals and superintendents in weeks, not months. With timely data, principals and superintendents can better mentor and guide teachers as well as make sound evaluations of their performance. I also believe we need a qualitative system of assessments..."

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson was heartened by Brown's comments: "Like many teachers, I have long argued that students need to spend more time learning and less time taking exams."

Sue Burr, executive director of the State Board of Education, agreed, noting that standardized tests have narrowed curriculum to English language arts and mathematics. "While those are critically important, we can't ignore history. We can't ignore science. We can't ignore civics. We can't ignore the arts."

Historian Diane Ravitch, speaking across the state, is broadly critical of standardized tests; but she does believe they are useful for diagnostic purposes. Ravitch cautions against high stakes use of tests and favors "a full curriculum, with arts and dramatics and libraries. All those things matter." Testing, she believes, focuses attention on "what's your number" (or score on the test) and away from meaningful instruction and learning.

Gov. Brown's speech has set a promising tone. Policymakers and stakeholders need to continue the conversation about the effects of standardized tests, asking how tests that focus on math and literacy affect other courses such as foreign language and the arts; and asking educators to produce alternate assessments that support authentic learning.

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Guidance for improving California's tests is close at hand. In a 2010 white paper, Linda Darling-Hammond outlined key benchmarks for a quality student-assessment system:

- Address the depth and breadth of standards as well as all areas of the curriculum, not just those that are easy to measure
- Consider and include all students as an integral part of the design process, anticipating their particular needs and encouraging all students to demonstrate what they know and can do
- Honor the research indicating that students learn best when given challenging content and provided with assistance, guidance, and feedback on a regular basis
- Employ a variety of appropriate measures, instruments, and processes at the classroom, school, and district levels, as well as the state level. These include multiple forms of assessment and incorporate formative as well as summative measures
- Engage teachers in scoring student work based on shared targets.

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