



*Week of Sept. 19-23, 2011*

## **“The Train That Is about to Hit”**

by UCLA IDEA

When educators or politicians propose school reform legislation, they should be able to explain in some detail how the new law is expected to help achieve the desired goal—including how to pay for new practices, how long it will take to close achievement gaps, and whether some children in some schools or states might benefit while others won't. It's not enough to set policies in motion and hope the thorny obstacles will somehow be resolved. Without explaining and defending credible pathways to goals, lawmakers can create new problems instead of solving old ones.

Two stories in the recent news highlight the pitfalls of education policies that lack detailed or even logical explanations of how the policies are supposed to work. One story begins with some good news. President Barack Obama has shown willingness to waive some of the more punitive measures of the No Child Left Behind law. Faults in this law were evident when NCLB was first discussed over 10 years ago. Meanwhile, there has been a lot of frustration and wasted time before legislators have gotten around to some needed fixes.

However, in exchange for removing some elements of the bad legislation, states would have to adopt measures that link teacher effectiveness to test scores. The full scope of possible trade-offs or leverage in the full bill isn't yet clear, but the details don't seem to include powerful levers to ensure the basics of healthy schools: reworking education fiscal policy, well-trained teachers, and a fair and just response to all children's educational needs.

In another story, a survey by Washington, D.C.-based Center on Education Policy found that a majority of districts in states that have adopted the common core standards are unprepared to implement them this school year.

The survey supports critics who have long said that raising standards without providing funding for materials and teacher training would not add much to children's learning. Seventy-six percent of districts in adopting states said funding was a “major challenge.” Only 29 percent had assigned or were planning to assign a resource teacher to help classroom teachers include the new standards.

“What it says to me is that there is a large percentage that don't seem to understand the train that is about to hit them,” said William H. Schmidt, Michigan State University education professor.

Common core, like teacher evaluations, presumes that there is adequate and equal capacity among schools and states. Likewise, teacher performance, and therefore, evaluation, varies according to the conditions for learning in different schools and states, including differences in class sizes, provision of teacher aides, professional development, and well-trained supervisors to observe and provide feedback to teachers.

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California's capacity is very weak, and it has gotten worse as budget cuts have eviscerated programs and personnel. UCLA IDEA has analyzed data recently released by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) for the 2009-10 school year covering all states and Washington, D.C.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, California ranks:

- **49<sup>th</sup> in students per teacher.** The state's average is 22.4 students per high school teacher, whereas the nation averages 12 students per high school teacher.
- **51<sup>st</sup> in students per guidance counselor.** Each California counselor serves 810 students, whereas the nation averages 459 per counselor.
- **51<sup>st</sup> in students per librarian.** While the nation averages 949 students per school librarian, California is almost six times higher averaging 5,489 students per school librarian.

This picture is based on the latest figures available. The outlook has only gotten worse since 2009-10 with further budget gaps leading to cutbacks in more programs and staff. With conditions like these, California's ability to implement the new standards or new expectations under No Child Left Behind is untenable.

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<sup>1</sup> Chen, C. (2011). *Public Elementary and Secondary School Student Enrollment and Staff Counts From the Common Core of Data: School Year 2009–10* (NCES 2011-347). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved 9/20/11 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.