



Week of Oct. 10-14, 2011

## Half-Right Reasons to Veto a Half-Right Bill

By UCLA IDEA

Gov. Jerry Brown made headlines this weekend by signing almost three dozen education-related bills. By far, most of the discussion among education reformers centered on his veto of Senate Bill 547.

SB 547 would have reduced the emphasis given to standardized tests in rankings of public school performance. It promised to replace the Academic Performance Index, or API, which reports on results of standardized tests in math and English, with an "Educational Quality Index." In addition to standardized tests, the EQI would have incorporated important outcome indicators such as graduation rates, dropout rates, college-preparedness and career-readiness. Authored by Senate President Darrell Steinberg, the bill had broad support, including Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson, charter advocates, business groups, career technical education, school boards and administrators.

In his veto message, Brown said the proposed EQI didn't address concepts he associates with quality education—excitement, curiosity and love of learning. Brown also expressed his belief that school improvement requires people coming together in dialogue and creating communities of change as much as creating more quantitative measurements.

"SB547 certainly would add more things to measure, but it is doubtful that it would actually improve our schools," Brown wrote. "Adding more speedometers to a broken car won't turn it into a high-performance machine."

It's too bad that California education has lost the chance to bring important indicators (i.e. graduation rates) into its evaluation system. Nonetheless, Brown's criticism is valid in saying the new indicators would leave the state with too narrow a view of what constitutes valuable learning outcomes.

Both politicians make a valid case, but both miss key points. A quality education is defined by *what* students learn and *how* they learn. Certainly, we care about the knowledge and skills students acquire, but we also want young people to experience supportive, engaging and thought-provoking classrooms. Any index of educational quality needs to incorporate information about conditions for learning alongside data on outcomes.

In addition, both Steinberg's bill and Brown's reasons for vetoing it are silent on California's pathetically insufficient capacity to mount a quality public education system. Neither speaks to school conditions across the state and how schools are struggling under the weight of budget cuts. Neither challenges schools and public officials to engage parents and communities in efforts to improve educational quality.

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Schools need information and they need to discuss and use the information to improve the school culture and students' access to the highest levels of curriculum and instruction. The original Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999, which set up the API, cautioned that an effective accountability system would require community involvement, be easily accessible to parents, and include both rewards and interventions to support school improvement. Steinberg and Brown are both *half*-right. If they could pull together the tools, leadership, and money schools need, then students would have a chance.

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