



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Dec. 12-16, 2011

We Have Some Questions for 2012

By UCLA IDEA

In 2011, Californians asked urgent, sensible questions about schools—the kind of questions that show their deep concern and a good understanding of what's important to children's learning. However, the questions often fell into the partisan and contentious mire that characterizes our current political environment. For 2012, they will remain and UCLA IDEA will keep asking.

What is teacher quality and how can it be promoted? Many states took on value-added measures and other teacher-evaluation systems, most, like Florida, tied it to standardized tests. The National Education Policy Center released a report exposing flaws of the Los Angeles Times' value-added model.

What are fair and useful assessments, and how can they be used to create better and more equitable school outcomes? In May, the National Research Council reported that standardized testing has not significantly increased levels of proficiency since the advent of No Child Left Behind 10 years ago. Almost half of states are not meeting NCLB targets and are not on track to meet the 2014 deadline for 100-percent proficiency. In light of this, many states sought waivers from the law's more punitive mandates. And in California, Gov. Jerry Brown vetoed an alternative accountability measure to replace the Academic Performance Index, or API, that would have reduced emphasis on standardized tests.

What should be the role of parents and community members in school improvement? The Parent Trigger law, which was first passed in California, gained popularity in other states. With support from several billionaires (Walton, Broad, and Gates), the Parent Revolution group, which spearheaded the first application of Parent Trigger in Compton last year, conducted a statewide bus tour to promote the law. Early in the year, an Ohio mother was convicted for sending her daughters to a better school district.

What are fair discipline policies and how can we create safe, respectful, and inclusive schools? A handful of studies were released this year that showed the extent of disparities in school discipline, and how the inequalities lead to more minority dropouts and incarcerations. The Council of State Governments focused on Texas schools. The National Education Policy Center reported on the school-to-prison pipeline. The Annie E. Casey Foundation dealt with juvenile detentions.

What should be at the core of our schools' curriculum and who should determine this? The federal Department of Education said to get waivers from the most onerous NCLB requirements and gain flexibility in spending federal education dollars, states must meet four criteria. One of which is to have "college and career-ready expectations for all students." Although states aren't required to follow any *particular* standards, so far 46 states and the District of Columbia have signed onto the

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same "Common Core Standards" developed by a consortium of states. These are likely to meet the federal "readiness" criterion.

How will we pay for education? This question beats out all the others. The multiple and ongoing budget crises of 2011 have meant continuous cuts to services and resources.

In January, newly elected Gov. Brown presented a bleak budget proposal that spared k-12 schools but slashed budgets for other welfare and social services that poor families and children need. That budget was coupled with a push for tax extensions. Then came a season of massive layoffs, declarations of emergencies, social protests in California and the Save our Schools March in Washington, D.C.

The state's higher-education systems—University of California, California State University and Community Colleges—raised tuition and limited access to residents in efforts to deal with hundreds of millions in cuts.

A glimmer of hope came in June when the state reported higher-than-expected revenues, and lawmakers passed a budget contingent on expected revenue. A revenue shortfall, however, triggered cuts to vital services. This week, Brown announced he will cut \$1 billion, including \$100 million each from the UCs, the Cal States, and California's Community Colleges.

While k-12 schools escaped a threatened additional \$1.54 billion in mid-year cuts that would have forced many districts to eliminate a week from the school calendar, they were not spared entirely. Trigger cuts take away \$80 million from the general fund and \$248 million cuts to transportation services will have a disparate impact on the state's most vulnerable students—children in poverty and special-needs students. Schools have spent a year on verge of complete calamity—just *barely* avoiding the fall. It's hard for teachers and school leaders to plan when they can only wonder, *what's next?*

2012 will see numerous ballot measures for increasing school revenues. As usual, we will keep our hopes up and continue to share stories and ask questions in UCLA IDEA's daily *Education News Roundup* and weekly *Themes in the News*.

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