



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Sept. 24-28, 2012

"If an appropriation for this purpose is made"

by UCLA IDEA

On Wednesday, Gov. Brown signed Senate Bill 1458, which loosens the stranglehold standardized tests have had on school accountability measures. Authored by Senate President pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, SB1458 was a second (and successful) attempt at revamping the Academic Performance Index, or API. A similar bill was vetoed by Brown a year ago.

A California school's API was based off a 1,000-point scale that measured student performance on standardized tests, primarily in math and English Language Arts. The new law will limit standardized test results to no more than 60 percent of a high school's API score. (Test scores will account for at least 60% of the API score for elementary and middle schools.) The remainder will be made up of student attendance, graduation rates, and other measures to gauge student readiness for college and career.

Calling it the "most significant education reform bill of the decade," Steinberg said "*teaching to the test* has become more than a worn cliché because 100 percent of the API relied on bubble tests scores in limited subject areas. But life is not a bubble test and that system has failed our kids."

Indeed, the legislation responds to urgent calls for a broader curriculum that combines rigorous academic preparation with civics education and the so-called "21st century skills" of innovation and critical thinking. Earlier this year, an IDEA report found that a diverse cross-section of California civic and educational leaders believe that California schools do not focus sufficient attention on valued knowledge and skills, and many blamed a high-stakes testing culture for narrowing the curriculum.

Further, the legislation opens the door for more people to be involved in deciding what to hold schools accountable for—and thereby, what schools should teach. The State Board of Education will have to determine in public what sort of outcomes are included in the remaining 40 percent of the API assessment. Alongside outcomes related to college and career readiness, the Board should also incorporate measures of civic preparation. Ideally assessment will call for students to demonstrate the capacity to identify and collectively address shared problems—skills that will serve them well in higher education, the workplace, and community life.

Discussions about what to include in a revamped API should also explore how to incorporate information about conditions for learning alongside data about student outcomes. It is important for the public to understand the essential relationship between opportunities to learn and student achievement (broadly defined). The legislature would do well this coming year to reconsider previous unsuccessful efforts to create indices reporting on learning conditions at each California public school. Supt. Tom Torlakson's California Education Opportunity Index and Sen. Curren Price's creativity index are two interesting starting points for this deliberation.

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Perhaps the most important part of Steinberg's new legislation could be a sentence buried deep within the bill:

To complement the API, the Superintendent, with the approval of the state board, may develop and implement a program of school quality review that features locally convened panels to visit schools, observe teachers, interview pupils, and examine pupil work, if an appropriation for this purpose is made in the annual Budget Act.

These panels would have the ability to examine the quality of educational conditions as well as how these conditions shape parent engagement, successful teacher-student relationships, application of learning in real-world settings, high graduation rates, as well as student-learning as measured by standardized tests. Such information could be used by local educators to improve practices and alter structures. Equally important, the panels would help us understand whether the state is providing sufficient learning opportunities across all of its schools to meet its lofty goals.

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