



POLICY BRIEF
***Closing Achievement Gaps at All Grade Levels:
The Next Phase for Improving California's Public Schools***

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Problem Statement

Over the past decade, California has taken some basic but important steps to improve its public schools. By establishing world class standards for learning, measuring progress to make sure goals are met, and beginning to hold schools accountable for results, California is creating real change in schools throughout the state. California's business community has been a leading voice in support of this common sense plan for school improvement; however, more work thoughtfully developed and supported over the long term is needed if students and California's public schools are to both succeed and improve on that success.

This work will take strong, well defined leadership from the Governor, the Legislature and the Superintendent of Public Instruction as well as local superintendents, principals, teachers, parents and business leaders. Increased focus on standards, assessments, and accountability must be the foundation of building a world-class education system. Data must become an indispensable tool used to drive better decisions about student academic achievement. A more robust reporting system needs to be in place to reward performance, identify and rectify problems and establish clear consequences for failure.

Accountability must serve as the basic foundation for what is expected and achieved in California's public schools. Yet, the State has no real system that holds schools accountable for getting all students to grade-level in reading, writing and mathematics – a system that should demand swift and profound interventions for chronically low-performing schools and real incentives for schools that show steady and sustained improvement in student academic achievement and closing achievement gaps.

The Governor and other education policy leaders have proclaimed 2008 as the year of education in California. Many are stating publicly that the persistent achievement gap in our public schools must be closed. The business community could not agree more. However, the overt *expectations gap* in our state capitol that trickles down and throughout the education system translates directly into real and measurable *achievement gaps* in our public schools.

Willingness to Set Expectations

Preparing students for success in college and the workforce of the future requires that we close the achievement gaps, particularly among ethnic minorities, socio-economically disadvantaged students and English language learners, who comprise nearly two thirds of California's current K-12 student population and who represent our future workforce. Closing achievement gaps among these student populations requires not just leadership at the state level stating that it is important, but a willingness and clear direction to the education system that the achievement gap can be closed and that it is already happening in many schools across the state. California will never achieve the potential of a standards-based accountability system if our state education leaders continue to say that it is unrealistic for all students to reach grade level every year. Expectations gaps equal achievement gaps.

We must drive the debate beyond the usual questions of "if" we should have standards or accountability or "where" those standards should be set to instead demonstrate that standards can and are being met. Attention should be focused on improvement and giving a voice to those that are raising academic achievement and closing achievement gaps. High academic achievement is happening across all ethnic and socioeconomic lines in every corner of the state. Schools that are achieving this success start with clear, non-negotiable expectations that at minimum all students will reach grade-level proficiency.

Agreement on the Goal

California's education leaders, starting at the top, must agree on the purpose of the K-12 enterprise – that students must leave our K-12 system with the academic skills to be ready for college and ready for work. The metrics to reach this end goal cannot simply be small and inflated growth on artificial measures of progress, but a clear focus on getting all students to a minimum of grade-level proficiency every year in English Language Arts, Math and Science. Too often leaders at all levels of the education system either negotiate this goal down to a lower level or worse confuse the purpose of the K-12 enterprise with so many ancillary goals that nothing measurable is accomplished -- all at the expense of academic achievement.

California should require that all state academic performance reporting is based on "grade level" proficiency as a minimum benchmark. Current California-specific reporting, using only the Academic Performance Index (API), is misleading and confusing because it focuses on school-wide growth with no reporting of whether or not a student is at grade level, thus being prepared to succeed in the next grade. The state API growth target is calculated in such a way that in many cases it will take students an unacceptable 44 to 84 years to reach grade level proficiency at the rate of growth acceptable under the California API system. Most alarmingly, this "growth" is very often at the expense of ethnic subgroups whose achievement gaps based upon reaching grade-level may be actually increasing over time.

Accountability Drives Improvement

California has some basic foundations of a functioning accountability system. High academic standards for each grade and subject, along with a quality standards based test that provides an accurate, consistent measure of progress towards students meeting the standards have created a structure from which all schools can and should improve. However, California still lacks a clear system of consequences and mandated corrective interventions for schools that are chronic poor performers.

The basic question we must ask of our state education accountability system is: What happens to a school that does not meet its growth targets (including subgroup growth targets)?

If the answer to this question is nothing, then we do not have an accountability system. This is the case as it currently stands in California.

In 2005 the Department of Education instituted its first announced “sanctions” on six schools for their lack of growth on the API under state funded intervention programs. Not only were these six schools not the lowest performing schools (many had hundreds of schools in the state intervention programs that were performing at lower levels), but the mandated interventions consisted merely of assigning a new School Assistance and Intervention Team (SAIT) provider and the development of a new plan. Meanwhile these and hundreds of other chronically low-performing schools continued to receive millions of dollars of intervention money with no discernable improvement because that is all we asked of them for the billions of dollars of investment by the state.

The next phase for California’s public schools is to establish an accountability system that is clear, specific and that serves as a tool that drives improvement in academic achievement. In other words data and accountability is not a “gotcha” but rather an accepted and committed way of doing business in our schools and across the system. High performing schools that have sustained increases in student academic achievement have already established an observable culture of high expectations and a system of using assessments, data and accountability at all levels. This same system must be embraced and consistently implemented across the education enterprise.

The API measure as the basis for accountability is neither clear, specific and certainly does not do anything to drive improvement – that was never the intention when it was created. It is not easily understandable, not measurable over time and sets a target that teachers and administrators have no clear idea of how to achieve. Worse, the benchmark for growth, and ultimately success is well below grade-level proficiency and by design will take far too long to get all students to this minimum but important goal.

Incentives and Interventions

Under federal law, for which California has set its own yearly proficiency benchmarks, there are currently 595 schools that are in the fifth year or more of Program Improvement. These are the schools that have not met the minimum proficiency targets for all sub-groups of students year after year – currently set at about one quarter of the students reaching grade-level. While some of these schools are improving, a vast majority of them are continuing to produce the same unacceptable results for their students.

We must have an aggressive intervention program of meaningful corrective actions. In some cases this may mean closing schools; in others it may mean reconstituting the staff or re-opening the school in another form. It can no longer simply mean creating a new plan with another SAIT provider. The students trapped in these schools, students who are falling farther and farther behind, deserve decisive action today.

At the same time we must reward performance -- every other successful enterprise on the planet does. This not only means substantial monetary awards to the top performing schools, particularly with at-risk students, but a change away from the reverse incentives of our state intervention programs (II/USP, HPSGP, QEIA) that fund low-performing schools. Currently schools lose funding when they improve academic achievement, even at very low levels, but can continue to receive funding if they do not improve. Funding should scale up as more student academic achievement is attained.

Rewarding performance must also include increased pay for teachers based upon their proven ability to increase the number of their students reaching grade-level proficiency and beyond. If this is to be the clear and specific goal of our education system, then increased performance must be rewarded. In addition, California must create financial incentives for teachers and principals to fill high need, high challenge positions and based upon their ability to raise student academic achievement.

Replicating Best Practices

The good news is that there are hundreds of high performing schools across the state that are overcoming real or perceived barriers to student academic achievement and that are on track to get all students to grade-level proficiency. California needs a systemic and systematic way of highlighting these high performing schools, giving them an organized and collective voice and sharing their best practices with all schools in the state. These best practices should be the basis for all mandated interventions and corrective actions based upon poor performance. All schools in Program Improvement status should be assigned a look-a-like high performing school team to serve as their coach for implementation of what has been proven to work.

By highlighting schools that are overcoming common challenges and barriers in raising achievement, California can get these successful strategies into the hands of teachers and principals who would benefit the most. This process of school improvement through replication of best practices and benchmarking should serve as one of the most important benefits of our state's public school accountability system.

Supporting Research

1. James S. Lanich, Ph.D., Lance T. Izumi, and Xiaochin C. Yan, "Failing our Future: The Holes in California's School Accountability System and How to Fix Them" (San Francisco, CA: Pacific Research Institute, 2006).
2. National Center for Educational Accountability, "Best Practice Study and Framework" (Austin, TX).
3. California Business for Education Excellence, "Closing Achievement Gaps at All Grade Levels: The Next Phase in Improving California's Public Schools (Sacramento, CA, 2005).
4. Focus group research with CBEE/Just for the Kids-California Honor Roll school principals and teachers (San Francisco, Sacramento and Long Beach, 2007).
5. Survey Results on Education Among California Business Leaders (Statewide internet survey of 1,342 business executives: California Foundation for Commerce and Education, March 2007).

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