

California's Evolution to Standards-Based Accountability

Speech by Glee Johnson, President, California State Board of Education
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One of the things that occurred to me when I was thinking about my remarks was: how did we get here? I've been involved in the education-policy arena in Sacramento since the late '70s or early '80s in legislative roles and then worked for Governor Pete Wilson. And I've tried to think back about whether there was a seminal event that sent California down its current path. With the luxury of hindsight, I've come up with one, and ironically, it probably wasn't one of our proudest moments.

I believe it started with a dispute between then-Governor George Deukmejian and Superintendent Bill Honig over the assessment system in the state, then called CAP. I know many of you remember CAP, and you'll recall that it had actually been allowed to lapse because of this dispute. When Governor Wilson came into office, there was great concern by the education community to reinstate that assessment system.

As a person who was supposed to know something about education policy, I had problems trying to explain our assessment system to this new governor—a very bright man who thought a lot about these issues. He asked, “How much information does the parent get to help know what's going to happen with their student?” I said, “Well, the parent gets no information on this assessment system. Yes, we test all the kids, and if the kid is in the 3rd grade or 6th grade, you might have something to report. But kids in those grades are the only ones being tested.”

He found it very hard to believe that we would have something he called a statewide assessment system that provided no information to parents. The only information to parents was basically media articles about how your school or district was doing.

He said, “Well, okay, how my district is doing could be valuable information. If I'm in San Diego, it's good to look and see how they're doing in Oakland or the Central Valley and compare with that.”

I said, “Well, the trouble is you can't really make those comparisons.” The reason was that we had something called “expectancy bands.” That meant that the only comparisons we made were between districts we thought you ought to be compared to. Why that made sense was also a little hard to explain to a bright man who thought a lot about these issues.

“So,” he said, “we're spending \$10 or \$20 million to have an assessment system that provides no information to parents, gives us no programmatic feedback, and doesn't let us compare ourselves to our districts or nationally?” He quite frankly didn't see the point in it.

We worked very hard, and it was a difficult period for a lot of reasons. As many of you will remember, the state was in a very terrible financial situation when Wilson came into office. We had a deficit the likes of which no one had ever seen. Deficit issues were compounding all of these issues around assessment and accountability.

Steps That Led to a Statewide Assessment System

For a little while we tried something called CLAS, a system that did test students at more grade levels. The one positive thing I will say about CLAS is that it introduced the concept of a writing sample, which was a good thing, in terms of driving instruction. Again, it didn't provide a lot of information to parents about how students were doing or show districts how they compared to everybody else. But it did have that really terrific feature of requiring a writing sample. If you're going to want kids to learn how to write, then you probably need to inspire teachers to teach writing, and one way to do that is to test how well students write.

Up to this point, we had no state accountability system. We had no state standards. Each local school district decided what kind of information and standards to have. As we began to work through that, we were told that while districts didn't participate in statewide assessment systems, virtually all of them did some standardized testing of their own. They used the CTB or the SAT-9 or some other test for their own information and so they could give parents information about how their kids were doing.

So Governor Wilson said, "Well, that sounds good. Why don't we institutionalize that at the state level?"

Earlier testing didn't tell parents how students were doing or show districts how they compared to everybody else.

And of course the test publishers told us it would be no problem to correlate information statewide from differing tests. The CTB and the SAT-9 counted for 90% of the market penetration, but there were some 87 different tests being used. The test publishers said they would be able to create a scaffolding ladder that would enable us to compare one district to another, despite these different tests.

That didn't work out real well. So we went back to the drawing board to develop a statewide test. I think at that point, the frustration level was fairly high for the governor. Again, his issue was, "If we're going to test these kids, we can't have an assessment system of any type that doesn't provide feedback to the parents on how their kids are doing." He said, "You know, we can just use an off-the-shelf test. We would probably spend less money and get more information."

So we did that. And as any of you who were around at the time will remember, the debate was not pleasant. But we did get the statewide single test, off the shelf, not aligned to standards because we didn't have any standards. Many argued it was the wrong thing to do.

But there were a couple of little features in the authorizing bill that I think made all the difference. One was the requirement that the state establish academic content standards. And the commitment for the state was that when we got those standards in place, the assessment system would move from an unaligned, off-the-shelf, standardized test to one that actually measured against the standards. Those two minor things in the bill provided the system we now have, which I think has stood the test of time well.

I also do believe—and this is just my own personal opinion—that if we had not had that original off-the-shelf standardized test, we would never have gotten to an

assessment system. We would have gotten all balled up in determining the appropriate standards and how to test against them. So in some cases, putting the cart before the horse can work. I really believe it provided the political impetus and will to move forward.

Implementing a Statewide Accountability System

That bill was passed in 1996. We've seen an amazing progression over the years since. We didn't have an accountability component until Gray Davis was governor. By the time he was elected, there was something to work with. We had adopted standards, and we had an assessment system—not one that was fully aligned, but we were working toward that. We had put a lot of money into the system (a billion dollars used to sound like a lot of money) for instructional materials aligned to those new standards, and that funding was to go out on a flow basis. For example, as we adopted the standards in English/language arts, we'd put out money for instructional materials in those programs.

So the time was ripe for an accountability system. There were some preliminary attempts at a system in Wilson's last year, but none of them really hit the mark for him or the legislature. Speaking personally, I was really happy to see Governor Davis step up and develop a system, refine it, and make it better. He also signed onto the High School Exit Exam, a piece needed in a true accountability system.

We now fast forward to where we have the important pieces of the accountability system in place. We have standards that are arguably the envy of the nation. We have an assessment system that has evolved and is clearly aligned to our state standards. It measures progress on an individual student basis, so that parents get feedback on their child and districts get feedback on the student or class and can use that information. We have instructional materials fully aligned to the standards. We have also developed a really key component: we provide staff development for administrators and for teachers to learn how to use those materials.

Jack talked about how we have not one but two accountability systems. I would even argue that we've got really two and a half, because we're phasing out one state system and moving to another, though they're very similar. He also described our goal—his and Secretary Bersin's and the state board's—of trying to come up with a system that identifies the right districts and schools that need help, the ones that truly deserve some sort of support and intervention from the state over time. The districts and schools that are not making their growth, not meeting AYP. There are a variety of ways these districts and schools can be identified.

Focused Intervention With Schools That Need Help

But I find it really kind of interesting that our system of intervening with these schools is largely based on a single approach: a support system called the SAIT process, meaning that we use School Assistance and Intervention Teams composed of external evaluators. The process is based on nine essential elements to look for in a school. None of these are groundbreaking; they are things you would pretty much think of as common sense. But it's been amazing to see how powerful they can be when you go in and really take a look.

California made the choice to intervene by way of the SAIT process, even though, under the federal NCLB and the state system, there are a variety of options for intervention when schools fail to hit accountability marks. These include everything from providing support locally to closing schools to opening charter schools to doing public school choice. The federal government's major emphasis, I would say (and this is my opinion), has been much more on the identification phase than on the intervention phase. They are more interested in identifying which schools they think need improvement than they are in what the intervention is. According to folks I know in D.C., this is because one of the federal government's big pushes was to get public school choice as an element in the intervention. In California, we already pretty much had that, including as part of our intervention model. So that wasn't a big groundbreaking thing here.

So among all the choices, we chose the SAIT process with its nine essential elements, which, as I said, are largely common sense. First of all, the process asks, is this school using the state-board adopted materials? In other words, are they paying attention to the standards? Are they focusing their instructional time in particular on the reading and the math that is required for students to actually achieve the goals set out for them in those academic content standards? Is staff development being provided to the teachers and to the principals of those schools so that they know what those materials are supposed to do and how to get there with the teachers? Are the teachers credentialed? If not, does the school have a plan for getting them to be highly qualified?

The nine essential elements of successful schools are really common sense, but it's amazing how powerful they can be.

One of the other keys, and it's actually built into the materials that the state board has adopted, is a feedback loop in the instructional materials. It's what we refer to as an embedded assessment system, which breaks down generally into six- to eight-week units in the materials. Along with the automatic feedback loop is our training that says, okay, this is where you should be at this point. Are the kids there? So you don't wait for a semester or a year to find out that, oh my goodness, the kids aren't even close to hitting the standard. The feedback is embedded into our curriculum, as best as we can make it, by way of the instructional materials.

We also have set up model of course pacing to look at. If you're going to cover all of these standards in a year, this is roughly where you might want to be at a given time. These are not dictates, but guideposts to give you a sense of where you need to be at given points in time. They become much more like dictates once you've been identified as state-monitored.

All of these things should be used by all school districts just as sort of common sense. It helps that someone took the time to put them down all in the same place.

Finally, and certainly not least importantly, is a fiscal question: is this school correctly using resources aimed at these issues to support the intended instructional programs? Are the resources intended for reading programs being used for reading programs? Are the compensatory materials and funding being used appropriately? That's really the backbone of this whole SAIT assistance process.

Again, these elements are all common sense. But they can be amazingly powerful. And we've been pretty comfortable with the results. I don't know the numbers of how

many have been able to move out of state monitoring after using this approach, but it has been highly successful. Sadly, there are a few cases where it hasn't been. Just in the past week, the superintendent had to announce six schools that had failed to make the mark after three years even with intervention assistance.

Intervention Expands to Include Struggling Districts

We're now moving into a slightly different and larger arena. Our accountability system was based at the school level. But under NCLB, the federal government requires intervention not only with schools but with districts as well. So we are now moving to amplify the state process to include District Assistance and Intervention Teams, which we will be calling DAIT, I'm sure. They'll be based on the same fundamental approaches. And just last week, the state board adopted the first set of standards and criteria to be applied against people who will be providing these services to districts. We will field test these during 2006–07 and then actually implement them in the field in the fall of 2007.

The SAIT process has been iterative. We've come a long way and have a long way to go. But I think one of the interesting things about it has been its intersection with the Williams case. We had our nine essential components out there, and districts and schools doing self-assessment or assessing with the assistance of a team assigned to them. What we found out is that, well, yes, they did have those instructional materials, but they were kind of locked up in a room and nobody used them because they didn't like them. Well, that really doesn't adhere to sort of the spirit of what this is about.

It's understandable that that resistance exists. School districts in California have a long tradition of being locally governed. And a top-down approach from the state doesn't sit well in a lot of places. From the state board's perspective, and I'm sure from the superintendent's, if you're doing well, that's not that much of a concern to us. But if we have materials that we know work with kids, and you have them locked up in a room, and

If your kids are not learning to read, and materials that we know can help them are locked up, unlock them.

your kids are not learning how to read—unlock the rooms and get those materials out.

That's what we're calling "SAIT on steroids." Go out and look at not just a checklist (Do you have the books? Are you providing staff development?) It's not just a quantitative assessment on those nine things, it's also qualitative: Is your staff development really quality staff development? Is it working with the teachers in the

classroom? Is it getting results? Do you have those embedded feedback loops on how the program is working?

We're looking forward to the challenges of using this process at the district level as opposed to the school level. It will be much more complicated. We're working right now, trying to bring that to fruition. And I look forward to doing that work with the superintendent and also to continuing our work on trying to figure out how to mesh our state and federal systems so that they do what we want them to do for kids.

Positive Shifts Resulting from a Standards-Based System

On a personal note, I had retired from state service after many years in the legislature and in the governor's office. A lot of my time had been consumed with fights over school finance. There is nothing like a good debate over how Proposition 98 really works, whether urban impact aid is getting to the kids, whether we have maintenance-factor funding.

I have to admit that I've gotten fairly jaded on a lot of those discussions, because to me, it really had begun to feel like we were only talking about adult issues. We were no longer focused on whether kids were learning anything. You can have those arguments, but to me, they're sort of zero-sum. We will always be arguing about whether the resources are adequate or deployed correctly. But the wonderful thing that has happened with this standards-based system (and thankfully, that's all the state board deals with) is the work that's been done on curricular issues—on the question, are kids learning anything?

The wonderful thing that's happened is that the discussion has shifted to the question, are kids learning anything?

The discussion has moved from whether we're funded the right way. To me, the important thing is that we're now focusing on whether our kids are learning what we all agreed that they should be learning. Are they coming up to the mark? How are we moving them towards that? That's a wonderful discussion to have.

We can argue about whether we have the right standards, whether the assessment is correct—that's a grand discussion to have. As long as it's focused on whether our kids are learning and getting ready to go out into the world and earn a living, it's the right discussion to have.