

California's Accountability System: Where We Stand and Where We're Headed

**Speech by Jack O'Connell, California Superintendent of Public Instruction
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Let me first offer a bit of perspective on accountability. Do you remember the accountability system that we had prior to 1999? Basically we did not have one. When you really stop and think about it, the state of California has done a lot since then. We've adopted world-class content standards. We put our accountability system in place, including the Academic Performance Index. You can look at your local school district's web page and see how your schools are doing. Or you can come to our web page at the Department of Education, and we list all the schools as well. We also now have our instructional materials and our assessment instruments, which are fully aligned to our standards as well, thanks to our friends at ETS who are helping sponsor this. So we really have come a long way.

Not One, But Two Accountability Systems

In fact, when you talk about accountability (and this is a sophisticated crowd), we don't have just one accountability system, we have two. We were so successful that we had to replicate and duplicate.

I think the easiest question I've been asked in this job came from someone at a Chamber of Commerce group in Long Beach, who said, "Well, O'Connell, I'd be for investing more in education and paying more for schools, if only we had an accountability system." So I said, "Not only do we have one, we have two!" And then I went to great lengths to try to delineate between the state system and the federal system. The state system is a growth model, which I talk about using the track-and-field analogy of the long jump. We want to see progress year after year for that school at that particular grade level. The federal system uses Adequate Yearly Progress, which isn't based on growth; it's the high jump. It's the high jump, using a somewhat arbitrary status bar to know how our students are doing year after year.

The systems use different models. The state's API is the long jump; the federal AYP is the high jump.

Now, both systems for accountability have goals, high standards, and—obviously—hold us accountable. That's clearly appropriate. It's particularly appropriate in this new economy. The new economy will require, without a doubt, higher-level thinking skills for all of our students: higher-level critical thinking skills, analytical skills, problem-solving skills. It's going to require a greater understanding of math concepts, better communication skills, and, I believe, technological proficiency as well.

In the past, we didn't suffer from having high expectations that weren't met. We suffered from having low expectations for too many of our students. Now, if you turn the

clock back also to 1999, I was in the state legislature. And when we talked about the accountability system that was being put forth, we got a lot of resistance from a lot of our friends in the field. You might remember that the initial accountability system said, “We have 9,000 schools in California; let’s just rank them, from the best to the most challenging, number 1 to number 9,000.” A lot of us thought that wasn’t fair, not a good approach. So that’s when we came up with our three columns: Okay, we’ll rank them, we’ll also rank them based on similar schools—comparable schools, looking at socioeconomic data. The third column, the one that I really focus on, is: did your school do better this year than last year? That’s about improvement. That’s what I think the growth model should be.

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You might also remember in 1999, 2000, 2001, our tests were not fully aligned to the standards. We used an off-the-shelf test. It was kind of close to asking the same questions, but it was a little bit different. Our professional teachers, our educators, were always asking, “Should we be teaching to the test, or should we be teaching to our standards?” Remember that? You don’t hear that anymore, do you? That’s because the tests are now aligned to our standards.

So today I’m really pleased that accountability and standards are part of our education landscape.

Confusing Signals about School Performance

Now when I talk to other state superintendents around the country, I hear that when NCLB was first taking effect states that did not have standards or an accountability system found NCLB relatively easy to adopt. They had a clean slate. So they were able to simply incorporate what the federal legislation in NCLB was asking for. For California, it has created a confusing, often contradictory situation; one day the press reports that your local elementary school is improving and showing great strides and everybody feels great. The next day, people realize your school did not meet AYP for a particular reason, and perhaps is subject to Program Improvement. Suddenly—24 hours later—that same school is labeled failing.

Both of these accountability systems are designed to measure student achievement, and both are designed to help us close that achievement gap. So keep in mind my analogy: that API is the long jump and AYP is that high-jump bar. In fact, if a school falls short on AYP, it really doesn’t matter if it gets close to that bar or not; it’s just labeled as failing and could be subject to Program Improvement, even if it is showing progress.

I would have to characterize California as having an unhappy alliance with AYP. As professional educators, we know that the starting line is not the same for all of our kids. We also know that we have limited resources for intervention techniques that can help. Under AYP, if a school is above that high-jump bar, and even if that school’s test scores are going down, it’s going to not receive any assistance or any help or any intervention, as long as it remains above that arbitrary bar. Conversely, our API system rewards schools that improve on tests aligned to our rigorous standards, even if they don’t make AYP.

While it might be helpful to have two different accountability systems based upon two different methodologies, it's clearly confusing. I'll give you another example. In California last year we had 403 schools that more than doubled their API growth targets, and yet did not meet AYP. Talk about confusing and contradictory signals!

So overall I'm pleased that our education system, in a relatively short period of time, has accepted accountability and it has accepted the culture of change, despite the fact that the process has not been without growing pains and confusion.

Some believe that AYP will ultimately end up labeling so many schools as failures—and about 45% of the schools this year did not meet AYP—that that's going to hurt public education and support for schools. That's one reason why I support the growth model as strongly as I do, because I just believe it's a much more accurate portrayal of how well our schools are really performing. It's projected that within the next couple of years over half of our schools under AYP are going to be labeled as failing. So we need to ask ourselves: Is this an accurate portrayal of our schools? And do we have the resources and the intervention capacity to try to assist 45% of our schools today and, over the next couple of years, 60–70% of our schools? Some of us don't see that capacity coming.

Now, let me say something good about No Child Left Behind—which is sometimes hard for me to do! NCLB has helped us, sincerely, in focusing on subgroups. When NCLB first passed, it identified two additional subgroups that we had already identified as part of our state accountability system because we want a focus on closing our achievement gap. So a good feature of NCLB is that it does help focus attention on our subgroups. And obviously NCLB's intervention timeline is even shorter—a third shorter—than our timeline.

It's critical that we address the achievement gap. You might be familiar with a recent study that concluded that the biggest threat to the California economy is the achievement gap in education and if we do not close that achievement gap, our economy and our position as the fifth-largest economic engine in the world will be in jeopardy. So we not only have a moral imperative but an economic imperative to address the achievement gap.

The Challenge of “Harmonizing” the Two Systems

Two years ago I called all my colleagues, 49 other state superintendents, and said, “I'm a believer in the growth model and I want to raise the issue with the federal government of utilizing a growth model as a component of accountability for NCLB.” I was able to get 18 of my colleagues to sign a letter to that effect. But at that time I was asked to leave many offices—of Democrats and Republicans—because I was pushing the growth model as a much more accurate portrayal of improvement for schools.

And then I was really pleased when about three months ago, on the East Coast, Secretary Spellings, in one of her major addresses, said, “I want to explore a growth model.” She said, “Let's give ten states the ability to apply a growth model under NCLB for accountability purposes.” I know, and based on some recent conversations I've had

with colleagues, there will be more than ten states applying for these ten pilot-project positions.

Now, you would assume since California asked for the growth model, we'd be at the head of the line, right? Wrong. California is not eligible. We may be eligible in a couple of years when we have our student-information system up so that we can track each student all the way through the system. I'm hopeful that perhaps at that time, if the growth model proves as successful as it will be, we'll enjoy success.

Today we're working diligently with Secretary Alan Bersin, with the State Board, with State Board President Glee Johnson, and with our Deputy Superintendent Bill Padilla to try to harmonize the two systems. We're working on an improvement model. It's not the pure system that Secretary Spellings laid out, but rather would provide an annual snapshot of each school based on student progress. We're going to be submitting that within the next ten days, and I would like, at this point, to just summarize a couple of the key issues where the federal government is right and the state needs to make changes, and a couple of issues that we're going to put on the table.

In the changes we are proposing, we're going to treat each subgroup as its own school.

Let me give you a very specific example. As this group knows, every subgroup has its own calculation based on API. Our goal on API is 800. We want every school to hit 800. And I'm pleased that about a quarter of our elementary schools are at 800 today. But we want to get more—more middle schools, more high schools. 800 is the magic number. If you are a school today that is at 600, the difference between 600 and 800 is 200. And we want you today to make up 5% of that difference. So 5% of that 200 is 10 points. Next year we want you not to be at 600, but to be at 610. However, for you to be recognized for improvement, your subgroup only needs to achieve 80% of that growth target. Instead of ten points, your subgroup only has to improve eight points.

So in the changes we are proposing, we're going to treat each subgroup as its own school. If you are a subgroup at my school (think of any subgroup you wish), and the school gets 600, and your subgroup is at 500, that's going to be a difference (from 800) of 300 points. We're going to ask you to make up 5% (15 points) of that 300 to meet our accountability system. That will ensure that we're closing the achievement gap.

It's possible today, and we have examples today, of schools meeting our Program Improvement targets, and yet the achievement gap is widening in some subgroups. And the federal government has criticized us for that, and they are right. So we need to make that change and I anticipate the State Board making that change for us.

There are other issues that we're going to be discussing as well. Is the 5% growth figure appropriate? Should we increase the figure for the subgroups, to help provide even more incentive and more focus on closing that achievement gap? Is the 800 figure magical? Should it be 825? Should we commit to ratcheting that growth target up over the next several years?

Those are some of the issues we are working with as we try to harmonize the two programs and merge our two accountability systems into one. But the bottom line for us is to preserve accountability in education, and I believe that NCLB should be used to complement our accountability system, not to contribute toward its erosion.

We also need to make sure that we have adequate resources for intervention in the schools that do need assistance. We're going to hear Glee Johnson in just a couple of minutes talk about some of the intervention techniques and programs and give some historical perspective on them.

Accountability for Students As Well As Schools

Let me close by saying that we don't simply want to have school accountability; we also should have student accountability. And we do, certainly, when it comes to high school. That accountability is our California High School Exit Exam. The exit exam really is the capstone of our accountability system, and I want the exit exam of the future to mean more than the exit exam of today.

As this group knows, passing the high school exit exam is a condition of receipt of the high school diploma for the first time this year for the graduating class of 2006. But turn the clock back just a few years, and graduation requirements and standards varied widely. For some school districts (not all, but there were some), a diploma simply was a certification of seat time.

When you talk about that new global economy and higher-level thinking skills, the high school diploma has to represent the minimum, basic level of proficiency for our students to be able to function in this new economy. I want our students to graduate with skills, and I believe that the high school exit exam has already helped.

When I announced scores on the CST, the Content Standards Test, this summer, it didn't get a whole lot of media attention. I don't know if you picked up on it, but for the first time ever, our high school growth and progress outpaced our elementary schools and our middle schools. And when I talk to many of my friends in the field—teachers, administrators, para-educators, school board members—they attribute the looming high school exit exam for the focus that led to those scores.

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The additional remedial work that is being done is putting more emphasis on our standards. The exit exam, unlike any other exam, has always been fully aligned to our standards. I know it has been a culture change for our high schools, but it has been a change in the right direction. And I know that I've seen so many of our successful high school programs—before-school remedial programs, after-school programs, lunch-time—being used to prepare students for passage of the exam. I've seen some of the high school class-size reduction money being used for helping students in smaller settings—eight, ten, twelve students in a math class or an English/language arts class—prepare to pass the exam. So overall, the Exit Exam is clearly helping our students prepare for a much more challenging, demanding, and yet less secure economy.

We also know that we have many challenges still ahead. We do need to close the achievement gap. We do need to bring all of our students up to proficiency. We do need to make sure that our schools are adequately funded for public education. And we also need to continue, all of us, to make decisions based on data, based on research. Our accountability systems and our intervention systems are working and they are making a

difference. You are making a difference. So we must continue to work hard, to work together, and to work smart. The best is yet to come for public education, and the best is yet to come for the State of California.