



School Accountability Reforms Only Work With Parental Involvement

By Chuck Poochigian

In recent years policymakers at the federal, state and local levels have worked to increase accountability in our education system by measuring student performance and raising standards. These joint efforts have equipped policymakers, educators and parents with the tools needed to grade not only students, but also their schools. With the groundwork set, it is crucial that parents take advantage of opportunities for involvement in their children's learning experience and play an active role in ensuring education excellence.

BACKGROUND ON EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY MOVEMENT

California's current system for establishing standards and increasing accountability in our schools took form in the 1990s under the guidance of Gov. Pete Wilson. Governor Davis sought to build on that foundation. Some aspects of our state movement were also included in the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. The goal of all of these programs and standards is to provide policymakers,

educators, and ultimately parents with information on how local schools and districts fare, and to offer parents a choice in their children's education. Under both NCLB and state standards, schools deemed as persistently failing are flagged and targeted for improvement. NCLB gives parents of students attending consistently low-performing schools the opportunity to move their children to other schools. The following are brief summaries of some of the various methods for measuring student and school achievement, with links to Web sites parents can visit to see how their children's schools are rated.

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENTS

A. California's School Measurement: Academic Performance Index

California uses the Academic Performance Index (API) to measure a school's academic performance growth. The



API calculates school improvement by combining individual student scores from several state-administered exams (including the California Standards Test (CST)) into a single number to represent the performance of a school. API is also supposed to include attendance and graduation rates. Though API currently does not include these or other non-academic factors, it could in the future. It has been argued that including non-academic factors may dilute the value of the data to parents most interested in academic achievement. Individual schools' scores range from 200 to 1000, and when ranked by percentile compared to other schools in the state, scores range from between 1 and 10 (lowest to highest). Every winter individual schools are assigned a base score and target growth (based on prior test results), which is measured the following October when new test results are released. In some cases even a one-point improvement is considered growth, with the score of 800 being the target. In 2004, 64 percent of California schools showed improvement on their API scores, while 90 percent showed improvement in 2003.

For more information about API and to view an API County list of school reports please visit:

api.cde.ca.gov/ or
www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/apidescription.asp

B. Federal Measurement of Student Performance: Annual Yearly Progress

The federal government measures California schools' Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) by calculating the percentage of students scoring at the proficient level on the reading/ language arts and math sections of the CST. "Proficient" means that the student has a clear grasp of the grade-level standards. Additionally, the calculation includes the participation rate (which must be 95 percent), API results (a score of 560 or higher, or a one-point growth), and the

graduation rate. The AYP rates performance both school-wide and in each subgroup. In 2004, 64 percent of California schools met the federal AYP criteria, while only 54 percent met AYP in 2003.

For more information about AYP and to view school's scores please visit:

ayp.cde.ca.gov/

C. What's the Difference Between API and AYP scores?

The API uses composite scores from many tests and allows for opting students out of testing. While information on ethnicity and disabilities is recorded in this measurement, a school's API is calculated without regard to subgroups. API is one factor in the AYP score. However, AYP relies mostly on math and reading proficiency and requires a high participation rate. The most notable difference between the two is that AYP highlights any achievement gap, meaning a school cannot hide the performance of certain students. For a school to meet AYP, all subgroups in the school must perform well. If a school scores highly on the API, but fails to meet AYP criteria, it can mean that a subgroup at the school did not perform well.

For more information about API v. AYP please visit:

www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ay/apiaypelementso4.asp

D. School Accountability Report Card

The School Accountability Report Card (SARC), another tool for measuring school performance, was enhanced and updated in 2000 due to legislation carried by Senator Poochigian. A school's SARC can be found on a centralized Web page run by the California Department of Education. Individual schools post their grades on a variety of factors determined by statute. This site is a central location for viewing academic measurements such as the Academic Performance Index, the Under-Performing School Program, and High School Exit Exam results, and allows parents to compare two or more schools at one time.

To access the School Accountability Report Card for your school, please visit the following Web sites:

www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/sa/ap/sarclink1.asp and
www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/schools/accountability.html



PARENTAL CHOICE IN FAILING SCHOOLS

The move toward accountability does more than just provide information on school performance. It also gives parents options if their school persistently fails. The federal No Child Left Behind Act gives parents the choice to move their children to a better performing school if their school persistently fails to show academic progress or is labeled “persistently dangerous,” however, under California’s current definition, our state does not have any persistently dangerous schools. Therefore, parents are able to move their children out of a school for academic reasons only. School districts are required to notify parents if their child’s school is a so-called “Program Improvement” school, meaning it has not met AYP for two consecutive years and their child is eligible for school choice. Parents must be notified prior to the student’s return to school for the new school year. If a school is in Program Improvement, parents of enrolled students may have the option to move their child to another school and should contact their local district.

PARENTAL CHOICE RESOURCES

The education reforms of the last decade have greatly enhanced the ability of parents to monitor their children’s individual performance and that of their school. However, the only way that the drive for accountability in education will be truly successful is if parents utilize the new tools offered to them to ensure their children receive a quality education.

The following Web site allows parents to locate their child’s school by county, and indicates schools failing due to academics.

www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ay/ap/tireport04a.asp

For more general information about public school choice, please visit the following Web sites:

www.ed.gov/parents/schools/choice/choice.html or

www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ti/schoolchoice.asp.

You can also visit Just for the Kids – California, an affiliate of the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA), which is a central database that provides free, easy-to-understand data on many public schools in California in order to help schools and communities raise student achievement:

www.jftk-ca.org/



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chuck Poochigian is a California State Senator representing the 14th Senate District which includes all or portions of Fresno, Madera, Mariposa, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Tuolumne Counties. Senator Poochigian serves as the Assistant Republican Leader and as Chair of the Senate Republican Caucus.

Born in Fresno in 1949,

Chuck is a third generation resident of the San Joaquin Valley. His family has farmed in the Valley since 1918. Chuck and his wife, Debbie, were married in 1977 and have three grown children. He received his degree in Business Administration from California State University, Fresno, in 1972 and his law degree from the University of Santa Clara in 1975. He served for six years as a member of the California Air National Guard.

He practiced general civil and business law from 1975 until November, 1988, when he was selected by Gov. George Deukmejian to serve as Chief Deputy Appointments Secretary, and in 1991, Governor Pete Wilson named him as his Appointments Secretary where he served until his election to the California State Assembly in 1994.

RELATED STUDIES AND ARTICLES

Lisa Snell, *School Violence and No Child Left Behind: Best Practices to Keep Kids Safe*, Reason Foundation Policy Study No. 330, January 2005, <http://www.rppi.org/ps330.pdf>.

Lisa Snell, "No Way Out: The Illusion of School Choice," *Reason*, October 2004, <http://www.reason.com/0410/fe.ls.no.shtml>.

Lisa Snell, "Special Education Confidential: How schools use the "learning disability" label to cover up their failures," *Reason*, December 2002, <http://www.reason.com/0212/fe.ls.special.shtml>.

Lisa Snell, *School Vouchers as a Legal Sanction*, Reason Foundation Policy Study No.284, July 2001, <http://www.rppi.org/ps284.pdf>.



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