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Understanding and Using Assessment Data to Drive School Reform

"Data-driven decision making" is a phrase increasingly heard in discussions of school reform in California. Whether they are prompted by recently published research reports or by proposals on the ballot, decisions aimed at improving the quality of education and student learning require reliable student assessment data.

An effective assessment system is based on student achievement data and other benchmarks adopted at either the state or local level. The collected data must be "timely, accessible and understandable to teachers, parents, administrators, and the public"¹ to assure that each student is being challenged to reach his or her highest potential and provided with access to opportunities to do so.

The League of Women Voters is one of many organizations in California calling for more usable access to this kind of information.

The nonpartisan research and advocacy organization, Children Now, released polling information in November 2006² showing that the voting public is willing to spend more on public education as long as greater accountability is connected to increased spending. The poll numbers show 85 percent in favor of "requiring better and more accessible information so that we can understand how well specific classrooms are performing."

★ LWVC Position on Education: Pre-Kindergarten through 12 (excerpt)

Support a comprehensive pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade public education system that meets the needs of each individual student; challenges all students to reach their highest potential; and develops patterns of lifelong learning and responsible citizenship.

There should be... a student assessment system that is timely, accessible and understandable to teachers, parents, administrators, and the public.

INFORMATION IS PUBLIC AND ACCESSIBLE, BUT IS IT UNDERSTANDABLE?

The data to hold schools and their systems of support accountable for meeting their goals are readily available, if not always easy to understand.

ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS USED IN CALIFORNIA

API (California's statewide measure) ▶ The most accessible information is each school's Academic Performance Index (API). This is a numerical index, based largely on a single test, that is released each fall. It is frequently reported in the news and used by real estate agents, the press and others to grade schools across the state.

AYP (federal measure) ▶ The second score often cited to measure student progress is the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), which is the score required by the 2002 reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), more commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This act, first passed in 1965, provides most of the federal funds for K-12 education. This funding focuses on offsetting the effects of poverty on educational opportunities for students from low-income families. Schools that receive this funding are known as Title I schools. About half of the schools in the United States receive some level of Title I funding.

As part of NCLB, states were required to develop a single statewide accountability system that applies to all public schools and all students, regardless of participation in the Title I program.

The AYP scores are reported not just for an entire school or district, but also for four major “subgroups” of students: racial and ethnic minorities, English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and low income students.

Title I schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years must be identified for program improvement (PI). Schools and districts not served under Title I are not subject to NCLB sanctions.

Since this progress is judged against performance standards that are established at the state level, it is difficult to compare from state to state. California has standards that are considered among the highest in the nation.

These two scores (API and AYP) are largely based on California Standards Tests, a part of the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program—criterion-referenced tests, based on the state’s academic content standards (that is, on what teachers are expected to be teaching and students are expected to be learning). Students are scored as far below basic, below basic, basic, proficient or advanced. The goal is for every student to score at the proficient level or above; under NCLB, this goal is to be reached by 2014.

California’s School Accountability Report Card (SARC) ▶ A third source of information available to parents in particular, and the public in general, is the School Accountability Report Card, or SARC, as it is more commonly known. The SARC is public information required by California law and should be available upon request at the school site or the district office. Many schools and most school districts post the SARC on their Web sites.

A school site’s SARC includes test scores and other information intended to give parents an overview of the teaching and learning environment provided by their school. Test scores alone do not always give an accurate picture of what is happening at a specific school site. Both the API and AYP scores are based on test results known as assessment indicators. Also important, however, are non-assessment indicators such as school attendance, teacher qualifications and teaching assignments, the physical school environment, and, for secondary schools, graduation and drop out rates.

Scores for subgroups are an important part of the SARC as well. They provide one measure of how these groups are achieving compared to the total school enrollment and how they affect a school’s standing.

Information about testing and ratings is available at any school site or district office or at EdData online (www.ed-data.org). Definitions of terms are found in the EdSource online glossary, (<http://edsources.org/glo.cfm>).

AYP V. API: CONFLICTING ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS

It is very possible for a school to meet its API goals and fail to meet AYP, as they measure progress in different ways. In addition, AYP requires that 95 percent of the students in each subgroup be tested, so falling short in this area can prevent a site from meeting its goals. If a school fails to meet AYP for two consecutive years and it is a Title I school, it is identified for improvement and subject to corrective action.

This identification of a school as “In Need of Improvement” can be confusing, if not alarming, to those who do not understand what goals the school did not reach and why. A report issued in November 2006 by the Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) shows that conflicts between the state’s accountability system and the one imposed by NCLB have “made the targets for student achievement growth less clear, and have somewhat defused educators’ attention as they attend to multiple targets.”

The report points out that the number of “underperforming schools, as defined by federal law, will continue to rise as the proportion of students expected to perform at ever higher levels rises.” Because of the need to show measurable improvement in student achievement, both for all students and for all subgroups, there has already been a noticeable shift in some districts to a focus on those students just under the goals (i.e., to students already showing improvement and more likely to continue improving), diverting attention away from the lowest performing and those who need the most assistance.

UNDERSTANDING BENEFITS AND CONCERNS

To use the results of these assessment systems in a way that is truly helpful, it is important to understand both the benefits and concerns raised by the emphasis on “high-stakes tests.” A WestEd Policy Brief⁴ states:

High-stakes tests highlight what is often known but unstated—that significant achievement gaps exist between rich and poor districts and among ethnic and cultural groups. Reporting these data forces local educators to address this widespread problem... Administrators and teachers can pinpoint possible problems and redirect curriculum and instructional activities accordingly.

Concerns cited in the brief include a possible increase in student retention and failure rates; an increase in the dropout rate at the secondary level, especially among traditionally underserved student populations; narrowing the focus of instruction and assessment, or what is frequently

called “teaching to the test,” with less emphasis on higher-level thinking skills, collaborative learning and the fine arts; and overburdened teachers and students, especially when too many tests are added, “taxing precious instructional time and resources.”

Suggested solutions to these concerns include setting standards that are high but attainable; providing extra help for students who fail or are in danger of failing; incorporating alternative assessment for students who may be disadvantaged by standardized testing; deciding which tests are truly necessary; and providing adequate support for teachers in understanding the standards on which assessment is based and learning instructional strategies to help all students reach proficiency.⁵

NAEP: “THE NATION’S REPORT CARD”

Another important indicator is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a test known as “the nation’s report card.” The NAEP aims to trace long-term educational trends by testing representative groups of students in certain subject areas; thus it is not available for every student in every school or every year. However, it is the only test administered in every state and can be valuable for that reason. It is also useful to compare student scores on the NAEP with AYP scores for the same group of students. This can reflect the differences in state standards.

As Brian Stecher of the RAND Corporation reported in a commentary for *Washingtonpost.com* in September 2006,⁶

in Maryland 82 percent of fourth-graders scored proficient or better in reading on the state’s test—while only 32 percent of fourth-graders in Maryland scored proficient or above on the NAEP. The Post also reported a similar gap in Virginia—86 percent of fourth-graders proficient or better in reading on the state test, compared with just 37 percent on the NAEP.

In contrast, South Carolina’s tests are more difficult than the NAEP. As a result, only 36 percent of fourth-grade students scored proficient or better in reading on the South Carolina test, compared with 57 percent on the NAEP.

Stecher goes on to express other concerns with these tests:

Labeling a school a success or failure based solely on the basis of reading and math test scores reflects a failure of imagination. It downgrades the importance of other subjects and minimizes the value of students’ real accomplishments. Imposing sanctions based on such a limited view of the educational landscape is shortsighted.

As a solution to these concerns, he suggests adding alternative assessments of school performance, including the number of semesters required for English learners to become proficient; the proportion of students who are properly identified for special education services and who promptly receive those services; the number of high school students who take college prep classes and participate in Advanced Placement classes; and college admission rates.

OTHER CONCERNS

Another concern often heard includes situations in which students pass classes, sometimes with honors, then fail standardized tests in the same subjects. One school in Virginia reported that a quarter of students in beginning algebra passed the class but failed the state test.

In a *Washington Post* article in November 2006, Ian Shapira reports,

Students and teachers offer an array of explanations for why test scores sometimes fail to match up with grades. Some students don’t take the exams seriously. Some freeze up. Still others trip over unfamiliar language. And teachers sometimes are not prepped on what the test will cover, especially when the tests are new. Occasionally, some school officials suspect, classes aren’t rigorous enough to prepare students adequately.

Whatever the reason, the fact that some bright students struggle on state exams upends the perception that only the worst students fail them.⁷

A PROBLEM-FINDING STRATEGY

The goal of this testing, as with other educational reforms, is ultimately to raise student performance. Considerable research has been devoted to helping teachers use data analysis of “high stakes” tests along with teacher-oriented diagnostic testing to guide instructional planning. Where this is used effectively it can reveal which skills and subskills a student needs to develop in order to continue acceptable progress. Robert Linquanti of WestEd notes that this kind of data analysis “is not a problem-solving strategy. It’s a problem-finding strategy.”

Understanding these various concerns can help explain the sometimes conflicting reports that are issued and why they may all be correct in what they are reporting. Maybe the curriculum is not properly aligned with the state standards. Maybe students who are not native English speakers don’t understand the language well, but can respond successfully in class when they can question meanings. Maybe outside forces prevented students from testing well on the day of the test. It is important to determine which factors are affecting test scores and whether the scores accurately reflect student achievement.

“APPLES TO APPLES” AND OTHER REALITY CHECKS

In looking at assessment data it is important to make sure that any comparisons are “apples to apples,” that data from similar schools are being compared. This information is available from school sites and in most online sources.

“One especially notable statistic,” reported the *San Francisco Chronicle* in November 2006,⁸ is that fully 80 percent of the students in schools labeled ‘underperforming’ by the state live in poverty. It should be clear by now that while schools can do a lot, they cannot do it all. Any educational strategy must focus not only on what goes on in the schools, but on the conditions in which the children who attend them are raised.”⁹

As Mary Perry, Deputy Director of EdSource, indicated in a presentation at the California School Boards Association's Annual Education Conference in December 2006, comparatively, Californians ask more of our educators. The state has the highest percentage of students on free or reduced rate lunches, the highest percentage of English Language Learners. Yet California is 49th in the nation in total staffing ratio—51st for administrators, 48th for teachers. And the accuracy of the data posted depends on the accuracy of school and district reporting. Some districts and sites post well, most don't. Some post regularly, most don't. Perhaps this is an indication of priorities for limited staff and chronically underfunded districts.

Perry also suggests giving any report the reasonableness test—if something adds up to more than 100 percent, for example, ask questions.

In a Research Brief on Comprehensive School Reform (CSR), RAND researchers recently reported that while over 8,000 schools nationwide have adopted CSR models, no school in their study has fully implemented these plans.¹⁰ It is important to look at what is actually happening, as reflected in the reports, as well as plans that are on the books.

ACCOUNTABILITY—A TWO-WAY STREET

Understanding the available information, its strengths and weaknesses, and what it does and does not accurately reflect, informs the public's ability to understand and support school reform efforts. In *Making Sense of Test-Based Accountability in Education*, RAND researchers note:

Policymakers also need to persuade their constituents to be more patient in their judgments about public education. This applies especially to the two-thirds of voters who have no school-age children and little firsthand knowledge of schools.

Persuading the public to be patient will require evidence that schools are, indeed, responsive to public expectations. However, another part of promoting patience on the part of the public is convincing citizens that accountability is a two-way street—schools cannot perform to community standards unless the community meets its obligations to adequately support the schools.¹¹

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT USING ASSESSMENT DATA

California Department of Education: www.cde.ca.gov

California School Boards Association: www.csba.org

California School Finance (hosted by EdSource): www.californiaschoolfinance.org

California State PTA: www.capta.org

Education Data Partnership: www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/

EdSource: www.edsource.org

Legislative Analyst's Office: www.lao.ca.gov

Official California Legislative Information: www.leginfo.ca.gov

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE): <http://pace.berkeley.edu>

RAND Corporation: www.RAND.org

Stanford University Institute for Research on Education Policy and Practice (IREPP)—Getting Down to Facts Research Project: <http://irepp.stanford.edu>

WestEd: www.WestEd.org