

California's school test situation is a big jumble

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Beginning in the 1990s and continuing through three governorships, California bought into the school accountability movement, usually over objections of teacher unions and others in the education establishment.

Academic testing was ramped up, test results were used to rate the performances of local schools and school districts, and parents were empowered to use ratings to trigger conversion of poor-performing schools into charter schools.

Whether those tools improved academic achievement is still being debated. Meanwhile, the state is undertaking two major overhauls of its 6-million-student education system.

It's implementing the Common Core curriculum and standards in English and mathematics. And it's adopted a Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) that pumps more money into K-12 schools, frees up previously restricted "categorical aid" funds, and provides extra funds to districts with large numbers of poor and/or "English learner" students to close the "achievement gap."

Those two changes add their own performance measures to an already complex matrix, including those imposed by the federal No Child Left Behind program.

"The multiplicity of goals and performance indicators is confusing," says a new report by the Public Policy Institute of California, which calls for bringing some rationality to the situation.

The PPIC report is especially critical of the LCFF's rather loose accountability requirements, which, it says, "may create more confusion than clarity" by failing to "create a coherent set of objectives for schools."

Common Core and the LCFF gave Gov. Jerry Brown and legislators a rationale – or an excuse – to suspend or abolish some accountability tools, contending that they were no longer valid and needed changing.

One put on hold was the annual assignment of an Academic Performance Index (API) to schools and school districts, thus giving parents and others a quick guide to how well they're doing.

Educators don't like the API, saying it's a simplistic system that doesn't comport with real conditions inside the classroom. They particularly don't like using the API for the "parent trigger" process, so suspension strips parents in low-performing schools of that device.

Parents could use an alternate federal measure called Adequate Yearly Progress, but the huge Los Angeles Unified School District declared that by obtaining a waiver from federal achievement standards, it was completely exempt from the parent trigger law.

Underlying the muddy accountability situation is a burgeoning conflict over using student test results to evaluate teacher competency, especially with a judge's declaration that the teacher tenure system discriminates against poor and minority youngsters.

Confusing? Absolutely – with no end in sight.