

OPINION

Cheating casts doubt on STAR standardized school test

Alan Bonsteel, Orange County Registrar, June 21, 2012

After years of misleading results, the STAR test – which makes up almost all of California's Academic Performance Index, or API – has been undermined by massive cheating, with a crushing blow coming when hundreds of STAR examinations were posted on Facebook and Twitter.

For a decade, California Parents for Educational Choice and educational analysts have pointed out that the STAR test has never been secure. Old copies are widely available, and the rosy reports of ever-rising test scores have long been belied by objective exams.

We have also long pointed out that the term Academic Performance Index is a misnomer. In 1999, when it was launched, it was mandated to be a true index, containing multiple measures of the performance of our public schools. Thirteen years later, however, the California Department of Education still hasn't added any academic yardsticks to the "index" other than the ongoing standardized testing. The latest API results were released June 14.

Starting two years ago, a building crescendo of events has left STAR proponents defenseless.

- On Sept. 29, 2011, the Sacramento Bee reported that the California Department of Education had stopped investigating cheating reports, and started simply referring them back to the district level. It further reported that, in 2009, in order to save \$120,000, the CDE had stopped its computer analysis of suspicious patterns of erasures on the exam papers.

- On July 7, 2011, when Thoughts on Public Education, the journal of the Silicon Valley Education Foundation, asked CDE's director of STAR testing, John Boivin, whether the lack of erasure scanning had resulted in teachers cheating, he replied, "Sure."

- In September and November 2011, the Los Angeles Times ran front-page stories on the widening pattern of cheating on the STAR test. Then, this past April 29, the newspaper reported that "hundreds" of STAR examinations had been posted on online social media.

Defenders of the public-school monopoly in California have long contended that "whatever other problems our public schools may have, at least test scores keep rising." In fact, on objective tests, the scores have scarcely budged.

On the other hand, if one examines the SAT tests given to college-bound California seniors in 2000 and combines scores from the Reading and Math categories, and compares those with the same subjects in 2010, the result is a slight decrease in overall scores, from 1019 to 1017.

At best, one might interpret the overall trend on these objective tests as very modestly positive, but certainly nowhere near the uninterrupted gains claimed by the STAR test over more than a decade.

With the discrediting of the notion of "rising test scores," the intellectual argument about the most important issue facing California, school choice, is over. Our charter schools – public schools of choice – are easily outpacing our traditional public schools in achievement, dropout rates, reduced violence, better racial integration and higher family satisfaction, and doing so on less money per student than traditional public schools. And true voucher programs, which include freedom of choice of private schools, in places like Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C., are doing better still on even less money.

The only remaining special-interest groups propping up our crumbling public schools are the giant teachers unions, which are fighting to guarantee job security to adults at the expense of children.