

Opinion:

Schools can still cook the books on dropout rates

The state still accepts self-reported, unaudited numbers from the districts

By **ALAN BONSTEEL**, Orange County Register, July 20, 2008

All of us who live in an Information Age are familiar with "GIGO" – garbage in, garbage out. On July 17, the California Department of Education took GIGO to a new extreme, when it announced at a news conference a new computer system for tracking dropouts that uses phony data from day one, and gives the schools written advice on how to come up with ever more excuses for disappearing kids that will make it look like our dropout rates are falling.

Until our group, California Parents for Educational Choice, blew the whistle in 1998, the education department reported a high school dropout rate of 3.2 percent. We petitioned the State Board of Education and proved that the real dropout rate, based on hard numbers of students enrolling and graduating, was 32 percent – 10 times what the education department was admitting to.

The reason for somehow overlooking nine out of 10 dropouts was that the California Department of Education was accepting self-reported, unaudited numbers from the districts at face value – the equivalent of asking a boozing neighbor how much alcohol he drinks and not taking the answer with a grain of salt.

The education department now wants to turn back the clock and again use this same self-reported data, this time in the guise of an elaborate – and highly expensive – computer system loaded with lies about dropouts from the school districts and county offices of education.

And, just to make sure that the school bureaucrats get the message, the education department has put together an excuse manual for all the ways to explain away disappearing students, which can be viewed at www.cde.ca.gov/119128. Excuse No. 14 for a missing kid: "Being on an extended family vacation." Excuse No. 240: "Incarcerated in a prison that offers classroom teaching." Excuse No. 370: "Left the country."

(And, indeed, when state schools Superintendent Jack O'Connell last week revised the dropout rate downward by about 8 percent, it was, he said, to reflect students who "left the state" or "are categorized as continuing their schooling without graduating," according to Sacramento Bee columnist Dan Walters.)

The new system makes no effort to report to the public the especially tragic dropouts who never even make it into high school, but, rather, drop out in middle school – the fate of about one child in 25 in California's public schools.

This issue now is all the more urgent, now that the State Board of Education has mandated passing algebra as a requirement for graduating from eighth grade. Just as the high school exit exam bumped up California's high school dropout rate from 29 percent to 33 percent when it was first enforced in 2006, so, too, will the

algebra requirement cause middle-school dropout rates among our unprepared teenagers to skyrocket.

We already know how to count dropouts using enrollment and graduation numbers that are audited and accurate. We can account for mobility by adjusting these numbers upward or downward to account for increasing or decreasing enrollment in a district, and we can deduct out "acceptable" reasons for not earning a high school diploma such as going directly on to college.

Further, counting dropouts with such a scientific, proven system would cost millions of dollars less than the elaborate system just proposed by the CDE.

And we know how to keep kids in school, by offering them an array of attractive choices that will give them a sense of commitment, of community, even of family, that will keep them in school.

A recent study by the University of Minnesota showed that in the nation's oldest K-12 school voucher system, in Milwaukee, dropout rates in schools of choice are far lower than those in traditional public schools, even though the schools of choice must accept only students certified to be disadvantaged and even though they receive only half the per-student funding of the public schools. Here in California, our charter schools – public schools of choice – are showing the way to slashing dropout rates.

Our dropout catastrophe is the worst crisis facing California. A child who drops out now will be a tragedy for the state for the next half-century. It's time for us to demand that the bureaucrats running our public schools stop the lies and the frauds, and confront the truth.

And it's time to give every family in California and throughout the nation the right to choose the best possible schools for their children and give every child the right to a quality high school education.