

Flawed test, bogus spin

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On Oct. 18, the California Department of Education released the latest results of the Academic Performance Index goals. The claim was made that according to this API, our public schools were still improving, but at a slower rate than in previous years, a spin that was accepted by most of the state's newspapers.

There are two problems with this claim. The first is that the test on which the Academic Performance Index is based is wholly unreliable, and doesn't tell us whether achievement is going up, down or sideways. The second is that the Academic Performance Index is an index in name only; its title suggests it reflects a variety of evaluations, but it is still based on that single, unreliable test.

We are now in the fourth and last year of the current test, one in which the questions are almost entirely the same each year, and old copies of the test are readily available. Many California education commentators have pointed out that with such an upward bias, it would be surprising indeed if our test scores didn't go up each year.

Next year, the state is changing to a new test, in which half of the questions will be new each year. While this is an improvement, it still means, of course, that the other half of the questions will still be the same, and equally widely available once the test has passed through the hands of hundreds of thousands of teachers. Further, even with secure tests, scores tend to climb for the first three years as teachers and students become familiar with the new format and content. Thus, California is doomed to seven years of the appearance of rising test scores at a time when there is no objective evidence that actual achievement has improved.

Meanwhile, California test scores on more authoritative and secure examinations, such as the SAT and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), have been languishing. On some parts of the NAEP, California ranks 49th of the 50 states, just ahead of Mississippi. And results for the new exit examination for high school graduation, which is not yet required for a diploma, show 52 percent of the class of 2004 have flunked multiple attempts to pass this 8th-grade-level exam. Gov. Gray Davis has characterized this test as his "jewel in the crown" of California education "reform," but even if Davis is re-elected, it will be a miracle if this test is given in a form that counts while he is still in office.

And what about the components other than test scores that are supposed to make the API a true index of performance?

California's most crucial crisis is its staggeringly high dropout rate of one-quarter to one-third of our high school kids. The current system of self-reported dropout statistics results in fraudulent single-digit numbers being reported to the public. The California Department of Education has long said the gap will be resolved by a computer system in development, but that information system is on indefinite hold because of the state's budget crisis.

Violence rates in our public schools are also self-reported and utterly fraudulent. And our disturbing rates of violence on our high school campuses have everything to do with our dropout crisis because the No. 1 reason dropouts report abandoning school is fear of physical assault on campus.

Defenders of the public school monopoly point to California's system of academic "accountability" as the salvation of our public schools. In fact, every aspect of the current system would have to be fixed if we were truly serious about a school accountability system that informed rather than deceived the public.