

Opinion:

Higher Test Scores Fool No One

By Alan Bonsteel, Orange County Register, September 15, 2010

The California Department of Education released Monday the latest version of the Academic Performance Index, essentially a press release that was designed to conceal rather than inform.

The main exam on which the API is based, the STAR test, has never been secure. Teachers, who know the actual questions long in advance, not only can teach the questions that will be on the exam, but even hand out the right answers during the test, in sessions that are not proctored by any independent authorities. Thus, it is hardly any surprise that the "scores" have gone up every year for a decade.

By contrast, on the secure test that researchers use to evaluate real performance, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, California scores have been flat over the same decade. And, in three key components of the NAEP, achievement in California has worsened.

The API is hugely misleading for two other reasons. First, the longer children stay in our public schools, the more cynical and alienated they become. Thus, while test scores are adequate in the lower grades, they drop off a cliff in the high school years.

Second, California loses a third of its public school children to dropping out. These dropouts are, of course, generally the lowest-performing kids. Thus, as horrible as our high school test scores are, they don't include the performances of the weakest kids.

Through an extraordinary synchronicity, the California Department of Education released the phony API scores on the same day that the latest issue of Time magazine hit the newsstands with a cover story on the new film "Waiting for Superman."

This drama follows five disadvantaged families in a quest to escape violence-ridden public schools and enroll their children in charter schools, the public schools of choice that are the one shining light in our otherwise broken public education system. The film, by Davis Guggenheim, who directed "An Inconvenient Truth" with Al Gore, is scheduled to be released Sept. 24.

In a story in the same section of Time as the film review, an opinion poll found that 67 percent of Americans correctly identified our public schools as being "in crisis." Certainly, nobody in California is fooled anymore by self-congratulatory press releases when we all know that California's public school teachers are sending their own children to private schools at a rate 40 percent higher than that of the general public, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. And Californians are savvy enough to realize that the three key crises of our state, our

economic meltdown, the meltdown in our public schools, and the cramming of our prisons to overflowing, are all intimately interrelated.

The velocity of the consensus forming around school choice is breathtaking. About six months ago, for example, the New York Times made a startling U-turn and began singing the praises of charter schools. In June it ran a cover story on Locke High School in Los Angeles, once decried as the state's worst and most violent, and now turned around only two years after being taken over by Green Dot charter schools. The new Locke Charter School boasts a safer campus, slashed dropout rates, and Superman status in the hearts of the families it serves.

In a few short weeks we will hold California and nationwide elections. It is up to us, as caring parents, to make sure that at every debate, on every radio talk show and at every service-club appearance, every candidate will be asked if we can count on them to support the right of all families to a quality school that they have freely chosen. The crusade for school choice is, indeed, the civil rights movement of our generation and the most crucial battle of our time.