

Appendix B: State Accountability Profiles

CALIFORNIA

Overview

California is a leader in establishing robust standards for its students. Unfortunately, the state has not succeeded in translating strong standards into high achievement. Without a strong accountability system to undergird its education system, California standards have fallen flat. The state serves as a primary example of how standards must be paired with equally strong assessments and accountability in order to drive achievement at high levels. While the Golden State has dabbled in a number of different accountability models since its enactment of the Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999, these models—all tied to additional funding, and all optional for schools and districts—have since been abandoned.

Today, California has in place few—if any—mechanisms through which it might hold its schools, districts, students, and teachers accountable. Outside of meeting federal regulations, the state does not tie any mandatory incentives or sanctions to a school or district’s academic performance; it simply reports scores. Teacher and administrator provisions are equally lacking, if not worse: While other states have begun dismantling seniority-based pay scales and layoff provisions, California continues to permit the former and mandate the latter. The only area in which California is modestly successful is in holding students accountable. Students must comply with “no pass, no play” regulations, and pass a high school exit exam in order to graduate (though this exam is primarily based on sixth- and seventh-grade standards).

Few would make the case that California’s state accountability system is now (or ever was) well-equipped to ensure that its strong standards—which now include the Common Core—drive student achievement.

Below, we map California’s progress against six key components of strong state accountability systems.

1) Adoption of demanding, clear, and specific standards in all core content areas, and rigorous assessment of those standards

California is well known for its content-rich and rigorous curriculum standards. Even before adopting the Common Core standards in 2010, the Golden State posted high marks for its standards across all four core content areas.²⁸ In fact, a 2010 review by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute found that, while the Common Core reading and math standards would be a significant improvement over most states’ current standards, California’s standards were “clearly superior” to the Common Core.

California measures student progress against its California Standards Tests (CSTs), which are aligned to the state’s standards.²⁹ The CSTs comprise numerous assessments and are administered to students in the following subjects and grades: English language arts in grades two to eleven; mathematics in grades two to seven, followed by subject-specific end-of-course mathematics tests through eleventh grade; history in eighth grade, followed by subject-specific end-of-course tests through eleventh grade; and science in grades five, eight, and ten, with subject-specific end-of-course assessments in grades nine through eleven. California also requires students to pass the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) to receive a diploma.

Unfortunately, California does not set a high bar of proficiency for these exams. When mapped onto the proficiency scale of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, California’s proficiency cut scores reflected NAEP’s *basic* score on eighth-grade reading and fourth-grade math, and NAEP’s *below basic* score on fourth-grade reading.³⁰

²⁸ In a July 2010 review by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, California received As for its reading and math standards; the Common Core standards, which California adopted in August 2010, earned grades of B-plus and A-minus for reading and math, respectively. In 2011, California received an A-minus for its U.S. History standards, and in 2012, an A for its science standards. See *The State of State Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010*, *The State of State U.S. History Standards 2011*, and *The State of State Science Standards 2012*, at www.standards.educationgadfly.net/.

²⁹ The state also administers the California Modified Assessment (CMA) and the California Alternative Performance Assessment (CAPA). Together with the CSTs, these comprise California’s Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program.

³⁰ No data were available for eighth-grade math, as California does not have a general end-of-year assessment in math for this grade. See National Center for Education Statistics, *Mapping State Proficiency Standards Onto the NAEP Scales: Variation and Change in State Standards for Reading and Mathematics, 2005–2009* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, August 2011), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2011458>.

2) Reporting of accessible and actionable data to all stakeholders, including summative outcome data and other formative data to drive continuous improvement

California provides a rich database of information on its department of education website. Users can easily find data on school and district test scores, performance rankings within the accountability system, SAT/ACT and AP participation rates and results, dropout rates, graduation rates, college-going rates, teacher demographics and experience, and so on. Much of the student data are disaggregated by ethnicity, gender, disability, income level, and English-language fluency, and the assessment results are disaggregated by proficiency level: advanced, proficient, basic, below basic, and far below basic.

But while much information is provided, districts report that they do not receive it in a timely manner and thus cannot use it to improve their schools.³¹ In addition, the state data tool does not allow for easy comparisons among schools and districts. Further, users must run separate reports for each indicator listed above; in other words, indicators are rarely listed on the same page for easy comparison within a single school or district. The department of education website does, however, link to an outside website that collects school and district data and allows easy comparisons among and within those entities.

3) Annual determinations and designations for each school and district that meaningfully differentiate their performance

California differentiates school and district performance through its Accountability Progress Reporting system, which includes compulsory state reports—Base and

³¹ California has struggled over the last decade and a half to establish a comprehensive, longitudinal database of student, teacher, and school- and district-level performance. The California School Information Services (CSIS) repository, launched in 1997, was never fully funded and only grew to represent 60 percent of all students in the state. Next came the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), established by the legislature in 2002, approved in its final form in 2007, and put in place by 2009-10. According to the Data Quality Campaign, California fails to take a number of necessary steps to put CALPADS data to use: it does not link CALPADS to workforce data, does not provide stakeholders with data in an appropriate timeframe, and does not use the data to create individual progress reports, among other actions. Finally, in 2006, California approved the development of the California Longitudinal Teacher Integrated Data Education System (CALTIDES) to integrate existing systems to allow for longitudinal data on teacher characteristics that could potentially be linked to student achievement; but programming for this initiative was cut by Governor Jerry Brown in June 2011. See Marci Kanstoroom and Eric C. Osberg, *A Byte at the Apple: Rethinking Education Data for the Post-NCLB Era* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, November 2008), <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications/a-byte-at-the-apple.html>; *DQC 2011 State Analysis—California* (Washington, D.C.: Data Quality Campaign, 2011), http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/files/state_pdfs/CA.pdf; and Shane Goldmacher, “Gov. Jerry Brown signs ‘honest but painful’ budget,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jul/01/local/la-me-state-budget-2010701>.

Growth Academic Performance Index (API) results—and federally required reports—Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and Program Improvement (PI) results.³²

The state’s API calculation incorporates student test results on all four subjects included in the CSTs—English language arts, math, history, and science—as well as on the CAHSEE. Both the Base and Growth API scores are represented by a single number, ranging from a low of 200 to a high of 1000. A school’s Base API is determined by averaging its students’ performance, which is translated according to the following metric:

- Advanced = 1000
- Proficient = 875
- Basic = 700
- Below Basic = 500
- Far Below Basic = 200

The state ranks a school’s Base API against the Base APIs of all other schools statewide of the same level (elementary, middle, or high school) and of one hundred other schools of the same type (i.e., schools with similar demographics). Schools are ranked in ten categories of equal size, from one (lowest) to ten (highest). While these ranks are useful in comparing static performance, they are solely based on Base API and do not incorporate growth measures.

Growth API is calculated in exactly the same fashion and with the same indicators as the prior year Base API, but from test results of the current year, to show the amount of growth made by a school.³³ The state has set 800 as the API target for all schools to meet. Schools that fall short of the 800 target are required to establish annual growth targets until the goal is achieved. Each school in California has a unique yearly growth target based on its current performance level, as well as a set

³² A senate bill (S.B. 547) introduced in the California legislature in 2011 aimed to transform API into an Education Quality Index (EQI) and, for the first time, include measures of the preparedness of pupils for postsecondary education and career. (Currently, assessment results comprise the only criteria.) The bill was favorably received by many in the education community: Interviewed state and district representatives alike were critical of California’s sole reliance on assessment scores as the basis for accountability in the Golden State and approved of the inclusion of additional measures. The new bill planned to make EQI operational in the 2014-15 school year and include within it a State Assessment Index, a Graduation Rate Index, a College Preparedness Index, and Career Readiness Index. But while the bill was expected to pass, California Governor Jerry Brown vetoed it in early October 2011, maintaining that it did not go far enough toward reducing the accountability system’s reliance on quantitative data.

³³ Because California has altered the assessments included in calculating API (additional grades were added in both 2009 and 2010), comparing Base APIs across those years would not accurately measure growth. Thus, each year a Growth API is calculated using the same assessments and grades as used for the Base API of the previous year, and a new Base API is calculated incorporating the new assessment requirements. For example, the 2008 Base API is compared with the 2009 Growth API, using the same assessments in the same grades in both calculations. Then the 2009 Base API is calculated to incorporate the new assessment requirements. The next year, the 2009 Base API is compared with the 2010 Growth API, using the same indicators in each, and a 2010 Base API is calculated to include any new assessments introduced into API in 2010.

of API growth targets for each student group within the school. (Those schools or subgroups already meeting the 800 target must only “maintain 800 or more.”)

Along with API data, California reports federal AYP results. The federal structure sets different proficiency targets than does the state-required API index, but as all states are required to integrate an “additional” indicator into AYP, California also includes API data *within* its AYP calculations. For example, in 2010-11, schools were required to achieve about 68 percent proficiency in both English language arts and math, as well as reach an API score of 710 or a one-point improvement on the API scale, in order to make AYP. But despite this integration, AYP continues to be seen as wholly different from the API-based state system. An education department staffer characterized the perception in this way: “API is an improvement-based system that looks at aggregate-level scores with the inherent focus on moving students upwardly at all levels. AYP only measures the difference between proficient and not proficient.” Given the conflicting proficiency targets—and thus conflicting information on school performance displayed by API and AYP—all parties acknowledged that the current system creates ambiguities for schools and districts.

4) A system of rewards and consequences to drive improvement at the school and district levels

Rewards

The state accountability system in California provides no concrete incentives or rewards for high-performing schools—which is no surprise, given the state’s poor fiscal state of affairs. Instead, the state relies on labels of commendation to incentivize high achievement. The California Distinguished School Award program invites schools that have narrowed achievement gaps and met other API benchmarks to apply for recognition. Selected schools receive a Distinguished School plaque and flag. In addition, national Blue Ribbon awards and NCLB-required Title I Academic Achievement Awards are supposed to drive achievement to high levels.

But as one district representative described, these elements do little to motivate schools and districts to improve above a minimal level of performance: “Sure, it is an incentive not to be labeled low-performing and, sure, we have Blue Ribbons in place, but [these incentives are] not genuine or meaningful.” According to another district-level staffer, “It really comes down to the carrot versus the stick; ultimately, the incentive in California is to keep away from the stick.”

This was not always the case: California has cycled through a number of monetary incentive systems, but each in turn has folded due to budgetary constraints. The California Department of Education recognizes this shortcoming, however, and

assures observers that it is working to implement an incentives program in the future—budget permitting.

Sanctions/Supports

One district representative described California’s school and district provisions this way: “Though California’s accountability system has been in place a long time and there is a lot of energy behind it...the accountability system is not working well at this point in time.” That is a vast understatement. The Golden State has in place few accountability provisions outside of federal NCLB requirements. While it layers its own performance labels—known as Performance Improvement (PI) designations—on top of the federal system, these labels, which are based on the number of years a school or district has missed AYP, are purely descriptive and entail no additional consequences beyond those based on AYP.³⁴

District representatives report that NCLB sanctions have little impact on schools and are unevenly implemented. As one put it, the accountability system is “aggressive about identifying the low-performing [students and schools]” but the federal sanctions “[don’t] make a big difference.” The district representative also reported that the state provides minimal direction as to which interventions are most important and which parties are responsible for implementing them—and, in its current financial state, the state certainly doesn’t step up to the plate. With scant support and direction emanating from the state’s central offices, little is done to ensure that improvement efforts are faithfully implemented at the district level.

The PI label, however, does seem to serve one purpose: stigmatization. According to a state representative, “Everyone wants to avoid being in PI.” Teachers and principals, worried about their reputations, work to avoid PI status.

Beyond PI requirements, California operates a limited intervention program for low-performing schools. The Quality Education Investment Act (QEIA), the result of a 2006 lawsuit over the state’s failure to meet its financial obligations, is an optional one-time, seven-year program that will direct about \$3 million to schools ranking in the bottom 20 percent according to 2005 API scores.³⁵ The program

³⁴ The PI distinction, on its own, is simply a label describing the recent years in which a school has made AYP. Schools and districts “Entering PI” are those that have failed to meet AYP requirements in the same area for two years. Those “Advancing in PI” are schools and districts already in PI that fail AYP again in the current year, while those already in PI that meet AYP in the current year are labeled “Maintaining PI.” Any school or district in PI that meets AYP for two years is labeled “Exiting from PI.”

³⁵ QEIA is just one in a line of intervention programs that California has introduced and subsequently abandoned. The Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP), part of the original Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999, provided funding for schools in the lower half of API rankings making inadequate growth; in turn, schools were to develop improvement plans, and if they did not meet conditions outlined therein, face potentially serious consequences, such as state takeover. This program was soon replaced by the High Priority Schools Grant Program (HPSGP), established in 2001, which doubled the II/USP funding for individual schools but targeted those funds to the bottom 10 percent of schools. Compared

runs from 2007-08 to 2013-14; participating schools must agree to meet annual API targets, reduce class size, and provide a counselor for every 300 high school students. They also must ensure that their teachers are highly qualified (according to NCLB's highly qualified provision) and that the school's average teacher experience level meets or exceeds that of other like schools in the district. Districts with schools receiving QEIA funds must complete annual reviews for each participating school, ensure administrators are highly qualified, and meet textbook and facilities requirements, among other stipulations. Compared with accountability provisions outlined in other state profiles in this analysis—and given that participation in QEIA is *voluntary* for schools—few could argue that California has implemented a meaningful system that aggressively drives low-performing schools and districts to improve.

One bright—and unique—spot among California's school accountability provisions, however, is recent legislation that allows parents at persistently low-performing schools to organize to bring about radical change. If 51 percent of parents at a school that has missed AYP for six consecutive years (known as schools in "PI Year 4") vote to pull the "parent trigger," they can force the school to replace its principal, replace its staff, or convert to a charter school, among other options. The legislation was hard-fought by Parent Revolution, a group that organizes parents in Los Angeles and throughout California, both before and after its enactment. Once passed, many feared that the state board of education would water down the specific provisions of the law, but parents prevailed in compelling the board to enact regulations upholding the original intent of the law.

5) A system of rewards and consequences to drive improvement at the individual student level

While many of California's school and district accountability requirements have been phased out over the last decade, the state continues to enforce its 1999 mandate that students must pass a high school assessment in order to graduate. The California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) assesses students in reading and math and is first administered to students in tenth grade. If students fail, they are able to retake the test two times in eleventh grade and up to five times in twelfth grade. School districts are to provide additional instructional programming for students who continue to fail, either before or after school, during the summer, on Saturdays, or during breaks.

with II/USP, HPSGP required districts to play a greater role in monitoring school improvement and tied more accountability to inputs, such as textbooks and credentialed teachers. HPSGP was superseded by the Quality Education Improvement Act (QEIA) in 2007-08. (Schools participating in HPSGP's final cohort continued to receive funds under the program through 2008-09, but those funds were deemed non-categorical—as in, they were no longer restricted to improvement efforts—in 2008-09.)

Still, the CAHSEE sets an extremely low performance bar, particularly in math. The latter assesses students primarily against sixth- and seventh-grade standards; Algebra I topics comprise less than one-fifth of the overall exam. The reading portion of the exam assesses reading content through the tenth-grade standards—surely a higher bar than that for the math portion, but still relatively low, given the lack of rigor in the state assessment system.

California also imposes a “no pass, no play” policy to drive student achievement. Students in seventh grade and above must maintain a 2.0 grade point average in order to participate in sports and other extracurricular activities.

Finally, California does offer some limited options for students to enroll in schools of choice. Beyond NCLB provisions, the state requires districts to allow intradistrict choice, as long as a chosen school has enough capacity to take on extra students. The state also permits interdistrict choice, though both the sending and the receiving districts must agree to allow it. The number of students partaking in either intra- or interdistrict choice is unclear, as such decisions are made at the local level. California is home to many charter schools, however. About 6 percent of all students were enrolled in charter schools in 2010-11. The state also hosts a number of single- and multi-district virtual schools and programs that students can choose to attend. In 2009-10, about 15,000 students were enrolled in full-time virtual schools, though they comprised less than 1 percent of all students.³⁶

6) A system of rewards and consequences to drive improvement at the individual teacher and administrator level

California generally takes a hands-off approach to teacher and administrator accountability, letting districts decide how and when to hold accountable adults working in the school system. At the state level, almost no provisions currently exist to incentivize individual high performance or address low performance. The state allows districts to establish their own teacher evaluation systems within a state-determined framework, but the framework is very general: The state does not require that objective measures of student learning be the main criteria included in those evaluations,³⁷ nor does it require that evaluations differentiate

³⁶ John Watson, Amy Murin, Lauren Vashaw, et al., *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning: An Annual Review of Policy and Practice* (Durango, CO: Evergreen Education Group, 2011), <http://kpk12.com/reports/graphics/>.

³⁷ The Stull Act, enacted in 1971, requires that measures of student achievement be included in teacher and administrator evaluations, but it does not stipulate how much weight those criteria should carry. The law was amended in 1999; as it currently reads, educator evaluations must assess teacher impact on student mastery of the district and state standards “as measured by state adopted criterion referenced assessments.” In November 2011, anonymous families in conjunction with Ed Voice, an education advocacy organization, sued the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) for failing to comply with this regulation. According to Ed Voice CEO Bill Lucia, few of the state’s 1000 districts are in compliance with the Stull Act. See California Education Code 44662 and Larry Sand, “A 40-Year Shame,” *City Journal*, January 19, 2012.

performance across more than *two* ratings. The state only requires that new teachers—those without tenure—be evaluated annually. Tenured teachers may be evaluated every other year, and highly qualified tenured teachers with more than ten years of experience may be evaluated only once every five years. Tenure is (shamefully) conferred virtually automatically after two years.

Teacher evaluations are not tied to employment decisions at the state level. Districts must only offer improvement assistance to teachers earning unsatisfactory ratings, and tenured teachers receiving unsatisfactory ratings must be evaluated annually until they receive satisfactory ratings. The state does not stipulate that teachers with repeated unsatisfactory ratings be eligible for dismissal, or that their tenure status be nullified. Those tenured teachers who are dismissed have multiple opportunities to appeal.³⁸ California also requires that layoffs be based on tenure and seniority; in other words, the state mandates “last in, first out” policies.

California sets a minimum salary but otherwise allows districts to determine their own pay scales. The state does, however, offer select merit pay for high-performing teachers: The Certificated Staff Performance Incentive Act, part of the state’s 1999 accountability legislation, awards funds to high-performing teachers (as determined by the state board of education) in low-performing schools (any school below the 50th percentile). While the state encourages districts to offer additional compensation for teachers working in high-needs schools and subjects, budget woes have eliminated all monetary support from the state in this area. The state used to offer \$20,000 bonuses for board-certified teachers working at least 50 percent of the time in high-needs schools for four consecutive years, but the program is currently suspended for the foreseeable future.³⁹

California has virtually no provisions in place aimed at evaluating and ensuring administrator quality or holding administrators accountable for performance.

What are the strengths and limitations of California’s accountability system?

Strengths

Strong academic standards. California’s academic standards are rated among the best in the nation, routinely earning top marks in analyses of states’ standards.

³⁸ “Unsatisfactory performance” is listed among various other grounds for termination outlined by the state, along with “immoral or unprofessional conduct,” “dishonesty,” and “knowing membership by the employee in the Communist Party.” See California Education Code 44932.

³⁹ “Board-certified” teachers refers to those certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

Targeted approach to identifying low performance. While California is not always quick to take effective action in improving low performance, it is aggressive about identifying low-performing schools and student subgroups. District representatives repeatedly referenced the desire not to be identified a school or district in PI.

Limitations

Limited indicators used to differentiate school and district performance. The state relies solely on assessment results to judge school and district performance; no other performance indicators are used. Additional measures such as graduation and dropout rates would help gauge whether schools are ensuring that graduating students are ready for college or careers. In addition, while school and district API scores include aggregate growth, an individual-student growth measure would go a long way toward ensuring that all students are on track for graduation.

Confusion with different proficiency standards and growth measures under federal and state accountability systems. The different performance targets of the state and federal measures, API and AYP, create confusion for parents, community members, and school staff alike. California is one of a handful of states that have opted not to apply for NCLB waivers; this ambiguity will remain unless California specifically acts to remedy it.

Limited system of rewards and sanctions. The Golden State's accountability system does not reward impressive growth or performance. Nor does it impose consequences for low-performers, outside of NCLB. Further, district representatives report that even those NCLB-required actions are not adequately supported by the state. Certainly transparency is a necessity in twenty-first-century state accountability systems, but it cannot be expected to drive school and district improvement by itself.

Limited adult accountability. California has no system in place to ensure highly effective, high-quality staff. The state does not require that measures of student achievement be the chief criteria in teacher evaluations—nor does it appear to hold districts to the requirement that they be included at all—and it does not compel districts to base employment decisions on evaluations. (We're told, too, that the state is not considering adding such policies in the future.) Further, according to district representatives, the state adamantly discourages districts and schools from experimenting with these initiatives on a local level.

Final Word

California operates a subpar accountability system that relies on the ill-functioning federal NCLB system requirements for incentives and sanctions. The state falls short in turning data into action. Without a robust accountability system, the Golden State cannot expect its strong foundation of curricular standards to take root. And the hard work of schools, districts, and students will not be amplified or rewarded.

Information on California's education-accountability system was primarily drawn from interviews with state representatives, district representatives, and local stakeholders, as well as from the California Department of Education website at www.cde.ca.gov. Additional information was drawn from EdSource (www.edsource.org) and from the National Council on Teacher Quality's *2011 State Teacher Policy Yearbook*.