

# California's Assessments - A Failed System of Accountability

By California State Assemblyman Ray Haynes, written March 27, 2006

In 1999, then Governor Gray Davis pushed a school accountability system through the Legislature. The system had three major components: (1) a comprehensive testing process designed to measure a school's progress in educating children; (2) An academic performance index (API), to report the results of schools to the public; and (3) A high school exit exam, designed to make sure every student has a basic level of skills before they can get their high school diploma.

The system sounded good, but I voted against the bill because I believed that the system, while promising much, would deliver too little. The API included factors other than academic performance (like attendance, number of credentialed teachers, etc) that could make a school look like it was improving the delivery of education to its students, when in fact the students weren't improving. Another problem is that the API reports test scores by school, and not by classroom, so that a few good teachers could prop up an entire school leaving most of the students in that school behind. This week I found that even I couldn't predict all of the things that the school establishment could do to hide its inability to do the job the taxpayers are paying them to do.

It turns out that some of the schools, or someone in the bureaucracy, is changing the schools' API. In a press release this week from the California Business for Education Excellence (CBEE), the CBEE details the scores of a school in the Fremont School District whose 2001 base score was 773 and its 2005 "growth" score was 743. In most places, that is a drop of 30 points. But not in the "new" new math of our government run schools.

It turns out that the "base" score of each school is changed each year, because a different set of students comes into the school, and it is impossible to compare how well the school is doing. For instance, at the Fremont school, the growth score in 2002 was 16 points higher than the base score in 2001, but in 2005, the growth score was only 4 points higher than the base score. Why?

The fact is the API does not measure how many students at that school are performing at grade level. In addition, minority students are only required to meet 80% of the growth targets of white students. Essentially this means that the educators can slack off on teaching African-Americans and Hispanics, and still look like they are doing well. If this had been occurring in pre-1960 Alabama, it would have been called racism.

Finally, using the growth targets set by the API, it could take a student 50 years to reach grade level proficiency. Even if those scores were doubled, it would still take over 20 years for the schools to improve enough to be helpful to its students' academic performance.

For some time, we have given schools money for meeting their academic growth targets. We have directed money to those schools that are not meeting these very basic minimums (even calling them "high priority schools" so that we wouldn't hurt their self-

esteem by calling them "low-performing schools"). We are spending 30 per cent more per student than we were 10 years ago to help these students succeed.

And the state is still failing miserably. What is more, the state is doing everything in its power to obscure that failure, while pretending that it is holding teachers accountable. The adults who are making huge salaries off of this failing system continue to pat themselves on the back for the good job they are doing.

CBEE is right. We should scrap the entire system and start all over again.

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### **Hilldale’s SAT Tests**

Hilldale has been using the SAT-9 national assessment for quite a few years now - - at least since 2001. This is the same test that the California public schools used before they started trying to dictate to the publishing companies what they wanted in their textbooks and before they devised their own year-end test.

Hilldale does not "teach to the tests" as some schools do. We do try, however, to prepare our students for questions which are similar to the actual test questions, so that they will know how to do their personal best on the test and will not feel overwhelmed by the process. Besides providing an accelerated curriculum, small classes, low teach/student numbers, and the possibility of differentiation for those who are faster learners, we also try to enrich the curriculum and experiences and to encourage critical thinking throughout the year. The rise in our scores is showing the benefits and results of our curriculum!

We have been carefully tracking our individual students' scores and our class scores for the last three years while we work on the curriculum and school-wide expectations. For the most part, we are very pleased with the continued rise in the test numbers. While there are still some ups and downs, both for individuals and for classes, we look at these carefully to try to determine the reasons for the changes, how we can improve the class curriculum to address any low areas, and how we can support and encourage those children who have areas of challenge.

You will soon receive an individual summary for your child and a list of the challenge areas you can and should help your child work on during the summer and throughout the coming year. This could include individual or group tutoring, review workbooks, lots of reading, writing in a journal, or other activities which you arrange for your child. Whatever it may be, please help your child to make good use of the summer to address these areas! Just one hour a day will make an enormous difference, and the teachers will thank you for your help!