

Crucial Issues in California Education 2000:



Are the Reform Pieces
Fitting Together?

Policy
Analysis for
California
Education
PACE

Elizabeth Burr
UC Berkeley

Gerald C. Hayward
Sacramento

Bruce Fuller
UC Berkeley

Michael W. Kirst
Stanford University

Preface and Acknowledgments

Crucial Issues in California Education 2000 is a successor to *Conditions of Education*, a PACE publication since 1984. *Conditions* combined up-to-date data and ongoing trends in a wide variety of indicators relevant to state education policy. In recent years, education in California has become more complex, undergoing both strident criticism and renewed support. To present a more analytical overview of California education, this year PACE has asked experts around the state to contribute chapters based on in-depth research projects. Their contributions allow PACE to offer the latest data analysis around a wider variety of issues, while continuing to provide overall strategic recommendations. This volume provides a unique function in policy analysis because it brings together numerous reports on components of California education in one source. Moreover, the scope of *Crucial Issues* is the largest in the history of the series, spanning child care to universities.

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Elizabeth Burr
Berkeley

Gerald C. Hayward
Sacramento

Michael W. Kirst
Stanford

Bruce Fuller
Berkeley

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Chapter 1

California's Ambitious Education Reform Agenda: Will It Energize Schools and Teachers?

David Ruenzel
PACE



An Unprecedented Surge in Reform Ideas

California's schools may face scarcities of many key ingredients, from qualified teachers to modern classrooms. But there is no shortage of ideas when it comes to how policymakers are eagerly searching for ways to fix the state's troubled public schools.

The team that crafted this volume, *Crucial Issues in California Education 2000: Are the Reform Pieces Fitting Together?*, faced a massive challenge simply keeping up with the reforms being legislated in Sacramento and the ways in which local districts have struggled to implement them. While the new mandates forged by policymakers have been well-intentioned, they threaten in number and complexity to overwhelm educators.

California's educators have gone through several generations of school reform. The 1960s brought early categorical programs aimed at serving previously underserved groups, from children with weak reading skills to non-English speaking youngsters. In 1983, more than 40 separate reforms were approved by the legislature. The 1990s brought new initiatives in the school-choice arena, such as

charter schools, a new state testing program, a mandated attempt to end social promotion of children, and radical reductions in class sizes. Bilingual teaching methods were outlawed unless a critical mass of local parents demanded that they continue.

But the new Sacramento-led accountability system, successfully pushed through the legislature by Gray Davis during his initial months as governor, is unprecedented in a number of ways. Aiming "to restore the greatness of California education" in the governor's words, Sacramento for the first time is tracking which schools effectively raise children's learning curves over time, and which schools fail to do so. Carrots or sticks are allocated by Sacramento. Curriculum guidelines and a new statewide exam, only partially aligned with what teachers are expected to teach, are also crafted in the state capital. The legislature has now told all school districts to implement a peer evaluation process for all teachers. Districts continue to struggle with reducing class sizes, finding enough qualified teachers, as well as ending social promotion and creating new summer school programs for those who flunk a grade level.

Yet only in selected cases do schools and teachers receive additional resources to push hard on all these reform fronts. From a policy perspective, the governance of public education continues to steadily move to Sacramento and away from local school boards. The expectations and mandates placed on these local boards, district staff, principals, and classroom teachers are rising dramatically. But Sacramento's political will—as well as the voters'—to provide additional resources to get the job done remains constrained. In March 2000 a majority of voters said they did not want to make it easier for local educators to sell bonds to renovate dilapidated school facilities.

In this volume, the PACE team offers mixed observations about this flurry of reform activity. On one hand, we feel good about the civic debate that has invigorated California for the past decade and a half. The expressed concerns of parents, civic leaders, employers, and editorial boards has moved policymakers—at both state and local levels—to enact a breathtaking array of policy initiatives.

On the other hand, the PACE team wonders if these myriad reforms will add up to a coherent set of institutional changes. That is, are we weaving together a patchwork quilt that, while colorful, fails to hang together over time? Several of the chapters that follow detail pieces of the reform puzzle, then ask whether the pieces are fitting together.

A second set of questions must be put on the table: How do these reforms deliver more highly qualified and skillful teachers, and how do they motivate the state's teachers to innovate and implement more effective teaching practices? In other words, do these puzzle pieces of

reform fit together into a coherent “theory of action,” whereby policies emanating from Sacramento will energize teachers in the school down the street?

From the outset we focus on the question of policy coherence. The chapters that follow push forward on the issues of whether teachers will be moved to improve and whether mandates without additional resources will really be able to bring forth more stimulating classrooms and pedagogy.

Do the Puzzle Pieces Comprise Coherent Reform?

If the current California school reform movement is in some ways a departure from earlier ones—particularly in terms of scale—it does appear eerily similar in one less than desirable way. While many of the reforms are sensible enough when considered as isolated components, there is the threat that they will never cohere into the program of *systemic* reform that is truly needed to improve student achievement for *all* California students. Fragmentation has long hampered the state's education system, and it may do so for a long time to come.

Of course, policymakers have long been aware of the need for systemic reform and have made serious efforts to push it forward. Responding to the limitations of single components of reform such as standards and site-based management to improve student achievement, policymakers and educators in many states, including California, began to create during the 1990s a reform agenda that takes into account the need to move on several fronts

at once. In California, many local districts, sometimes acting on their own initiative, moved toward systemic, coherent reforms. They realized that improving curriculum, establishing new roles for teachers, and developing school-level structures to support teaching and learning were each pieces of a solution that had to be addressed concurrently, not isolated topics to be sequentially cycled through policy mechanisms.

On the state level, proponents for what has become known as standards-based reform proposed four key *interrelated* reforms aimed at fostering student mastery of more rigorous, challenging academic content:

- establishing challenging academic standards for what all students should know and be able to do;
- aligning policies to these standards, such as testing, teacher certification, textbook selection, and professional development;
- restructuring the school governance system so that schools and districts are delegated the responsibility for developing specific instructional approaches that meet state academic standards;
- developing accountability mechanisms so that districts, schools, teachers, and students will all be held responsible for improved academic achievement.

Although many California business executives and educators have espoused this model of systemic reform, it has so far been more successfully implemented in other states such as Connecticut and Kentucky. In fact, in some ways it can be said that California has jumped ahead on implementing—somewhat impetuously, in PACE's view—the accountability component before the alignment and governance

issues have been adequately dealt with.

Consequently, California is currently saddled with a high stakes accountability system based on a single measure, the Stanford 9—a standardized test that has little correlation with the state's academic standards.

Some of the state's difficulty in fostering systemic reform lies, as the following chapters make clear, at the margins of, and even outside of the direct purview of, K-12 policy. The pupil population, for instance, continues to grow at over 80,000 a year, making it difficult for educators to focus on quality systemic reform while trying to accommodate such large numbers. Heightening the challenge for educators is the fact that many of these children live and attend school under very difficult circumstances. Statewide, the share of children living within impoverished families has climbed 24 percent since the late 1970s, now standing at one million youngsters in the state. Over the same period reading scores have dropped to the same dismal levels observed in Alabama and Mississippi, demonstrating that poverty played a major role in this drop. Clearly, as Chapter Two argues, the state must work not only at improving education policy, but at improving the living conditions of California's poorest families and children.

The surge in enrollment, combined with class-size reduction, has also resulted in a serious shortage of high quality teachers; in some California school districts—especially those serving the neediest students—over 30 percent of the faculty are serving on emergency credentials. Such inexperienced, unprepared teachers often have a difficult time surviving from one day to the next, much less trying to implement reform policies they scarcely understand.

Still, many of the obstacles to systemic K-12 reform are as internal as they are external; PACE believes that policymakers simply have not done all they need to do in creating a truly coherent approach to school reform. Systemic school reform, for instance, is supposed to be based upon assessments aligned to rigorous academic standards, something California is far from accomplishing. As noted above, the standardized test that California students are required to take – the Stanford 9 – is not at all aligned to the state’s standards, although augmented test items from the standards are being added each year. Still, some educators wonder out loud if the assessments will ever be fully aligned to the standards. Indeed, the new accountability system puts educators in the paradoxical and scarcely tenable position of being judged on Stanford 9 scores that don’t reflect the curriculum students are supposed to be learning.

Politically, things began to look promising in 1999 in terms of improving the state’s fractured state education governance pattern and aligning the system. Governor Davis took charge of the executive branch machinery, while his Democratic party was firmly in control of both legislative branches. This would have seemed to be a great opportunity to circumvent the incoherence and implementation failures that confronted the Wilson administration; after all, Wilson faced a hostile Democratic legislature and had a fractious relationship with the Democratic State Superintendent of Schools, Delaine Eastin.

However, PACE does not feel that a true plan of policy alignment and coherence has yet emerged from the state despite the many initiatives it has launched. California state policy, as

this edition of *Crucial Issues* makes clear, still has many obstacles to overcome in developing an education policy that sets clear objectives for schools and supports those schools with sufficient resources and autonomy.

A Summary of the Chapters

Chapter Two, “Early Education and Family Poverty,” argues that California K-12 education reform, even if it does achieve coherence, will be of limited effectiveness unless issues pertaining to family poverty and inadequate early education are more fully addressed. When poor children enter school they are two to three years behind their more affluent peers in almost every measure, which does not bode well for a state in which 26 percent of all children live in poverty. Preschool programs, the authors demonstrate, can make a significant difference in closing the gap, but in California they are hampered by uneven quality, varying affordability, and a weak coordination system that has different state agencies administering different programs. Even when good preschools and child care are available, parents find it difficult to get the necessary information about them. The authors offer recommendations for improved early education, including the establishment of links to K-12 reform.

Chapter Three, “The Schooling of English Learners,” ponders the question of how we can better educate the 25 percent of California students who are English language learners. Complicating the challenge, the authors demonstrate, are the high poverty rates among the families of English language learners, the still uncertain effects of Proposition 227 (the

1998 English-only initiative), the pressures of high-stakes testing, and—most important of all—the shortage of high-quality teachers. Only one-third of English language learners had certified teachers in 1998, partially on account of K-3 class-size reduction that siphoned the most qualified teachers from schools serving poor students to those serving the most affluent. Until an adequate number of well-trained teachers can be secured, the education of English language learners will be in jeopardy.

Chapter Four, “School Finance,” argues for the reconsideration of a state education funding system that does not, at the present time, have a strong connection to California’s educational objectives. Categoricals now consume 39 percent of state education funding, which means that many of the dollars going to schools are already accounted for before they even reach the schoolhouse door. While the authors don’t suggest that categorical funding should be eliminated—that is neither politically feasible nor desirable on account of equity considerations—they worry about the constraints an ever-expanding number of categoricals place on schools that need flexibility in order to improve student learning. The authors also discuss the need for policymakers and legislators to define what “adequate” education funding means in a state that increasingly demands it but yet cannot say how additional resources would be aligned with educational goals.

Chapter Five, “Governance and Accountability,” demonstrates how local school districts and boards have lost a significant amount of power over the last thirty years, as much of the decision-making regarding school accountability, curriculum, and finance now rests with the state. Yet despite this centraliza-

tion and the increasing power of the governor, the California education system sometimes appears headless, as “no single entity or individual has the authority to set the course for education reform.” The California public education governance system is deeply splintered with the governor, legislature, state board, California Department of Education, and other entities having influence over different pieces of education policy. The authors argue that such governmental fragmentation tends to undermine efforts to put forth a coherent program of reform.

Chapter Six, “Teacher Quality,” analyzes the paradox California finds itself in. On one hand, the state has made important strides in important areas such as setting professional standards for teaching and expanding mentoring programs for beginning teachers; on the other hand, California continues to be plagued by an escalating shortage that has placed thousands of emergency-permit teachers in the schools serving our poorest, neediest students. Qualified math and science teachers are particularly difficult to find, as public education cannot compete with the salaries in a booming high tech economy. While the authors see no “quick fix,” they do offer a number of long-range strategies to improve teacher recruiting, professional development, and overall quality.

Chapter Seven, “Student Assessment and Student Achievement in the California Public School System,” portrays an assessment system that is still evolving, albeit tentatively, to a standards-based system. The current high-stakes assessment, the normative Stanford 9, is not only not aligned to the state’s academic content standards, but provides a very limited “snapshot” of student achievement in California.

While the Stanford 9 scores generally show California students achieving satisfactorily, scores from other measures, such as the highly regarded National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are still substantially below average. The authors argue for an assessment system that weighs more than a single measure, cautioning against an overvaluation of standardized test scores that generally do not reflect what we most want students to know and be able to do.

Chapter Eight, “Connecting California’s K-12 and Higher Education Systems,” explores how deep disjunctures between the two systems send confusing signals to students preparing for post-secondary education. As matters currently stand, California students have to take many hours of standardized tests that count for little when they apply to college. And, once accepted to college, they have to take placement exams that are not aligned from one institution to the next, much less to the California high school curriculum. The author recommends the establishment of a K-16 policymaking body that can build bridges between the two systems.

Chapter Nine, “Alignment Among Secondary and Post-Secondary Assessments in California,” examines the alignments and misalignments in six different types of commonly used tests. Some math tests, for instance, emphasize contextual problem-solving, whereas others emphasize abstract procedures. Some reading tests emphasize the ability to draw inferences, whereas others ask for deeper analysis. Some of the misalignments between tests are inevitable, the authors argue, as one cannot expect a basic-skills test to emphasize the same skills as a college entrance examination.

Nevertheless, the authors draw on research to suggest that many of the misalignments are confusing and harmful to students who receive mixed signals regarding what kinds of skills and knowledge are of primary importance.

The Need for Coherence and Capacity Building

While this edition of *Crucial Issues* demonstrates that many of the recent reform efforts are fragmented and incomplete, we at PACE don’t want to sound unduly pessimistic. After all, considerable progress has been made over the last three years. Standards are complete and there is at least some movement toward the alignment of other policies. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the culture of teaching and learning in California is beginning to change. Teachers and schools are focusing more intensely on student achievement, and increasing numbers of students are beginning to understand and believe that how they perform in school will have consequences for their lives beyond school.

Still, we believe that more steps must be taken in the next few years—steps that will foster improved student achievement without overburdening school and school districts with more state policy directives. The shift must be made from creating new reforms to helping schools and school districts effectively implement the ones already in place. Most important of all, in our view, is the need for more capacity building: There is a profound mismatch between the demands that are being placed on teachers and students and the resources they

have to meet these demands. California policymakers are well aware of the need for such things as more counselors, better professional development, increased teacher pay, and high-quality teachers for our poorest schools, but will find it difficult to make up quickly for the many years of declining educational resources.

We urge, then, that policymakers concentrate on bringing coherence to existing

reforms and building the capacity of schools to implement them rather than on adding new ones to an already very full slate. After the reform frenzy of the last few years educators need breathing space, not an onslaught of new initiatives. California's schools must now be given the time, opportunity, and resources they need to succeed.