

# California looking at how best to grade schools

By Jim Sanders, Sacramento Bee

California schools spend all year grading student performance, but lawmakers are turning the tables with an issue that strikes at the heart of education: How should a school be graded?

Parents have a right to know if their child's campus is passing or failing; the current yardstick is based entirely on standardized test scores, sparking a Capitol push for change.

Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg says the system provides incentive to "teach to the test" and shortchanges students by not properly gauging their readiness for college or career.

Bubble-test questions are important, but so are critical thinking, complex problem-solving and effective communication skills, and school evaluation should reflect that, Steinberg contends.

"What counts, matters," the Sacramento Democrat said. "And what matters, counts."

Steinberg is pushing Senate Bill 1458 to de-emphasize standardized tests in evaluating schools, giving them 40 percent or less of the weight, for example, in judging a high school's performance.

Changing how schools are graded could alter decisions they make, affecting how courses are taught, what topics are stressed and the number of vocational classes offered, Steinberg said.

"How do we engage young people in a more effective way?" he

said.

Steinberg said schools need more innovation, more combining of academic skills with career-oriented instruction – a University of California institute, for example, has designed a high school course in which students use mathematics to design a house that can be heated and cooled by sunlight.

“We’ve got to get away from this notion that one size fits all,” said Assemblywoman Julia Brownley, D-Santa Monica.

Others caution that misguided change could make matters worse. Consensus has not been reached on what multiple measurements should be used in judging schools or how much weight to give them.

De-emphasizing test scores could backfire by pulling the spotlight away from the building blocks of childhood education: basic reading, writing and arithmetic, critics say.

Margaret Fortune, a charter school operator and former education adviser to Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, said she is not familiar with details of SB 1458 but that multiple measurements could “water down” school evaluation.

“Any attempt to mask, whether deliberate or unintentional, what is going on in schools around the education of students of color, and students living in poverty, ought to be a direction we turn away from,” Fortune said.

Republicans opposed the bill when it passed the Senate, saying that it would de-emphasize testing too much. Regardless of whether students are preparing for college or career, they need the core academic skills measured by standardized tests, a GOP analysis said.

California currently produces an annual Academic Performance Index score that is used to rank each campus, by decile, against every other school statewide and against those with

similar socioeconomic characteristics.

The score is determined entirely by results of standardized tests, though when the accountability system was created 13 years ago, rankings were designed to consider other indicators as well, including attendance and high school graduation rates.

Steinberg's measure calls for standardized test results to make up at least 40 percent of an elementary or middle school's score but no more than 40 percent of a high school's score.

The bill does not specify other elements for the performance index, besides test scores and graduation rates. But it encourages measurements of student readiness for college or career, and it authorizes use of the rate at which pupils successfully promote from one grade to the next in middle and high school.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson, with approval from the state Board of Education, would design a final plan.

Steinberg said possibilities for measuring college and career readiness include rates that a high school's students require college remedial courses or rates at which they are admitted to a university, apprenticeship or professional licensing program.

SB 1458 would drop the wholesale API ranking of schools by decile, but it would retain the similar schools comparison. It calls for a separate system of local review, if money becomes available, in which panels of evaluators would observe teachers, interview students and examine student work.

The California Teachers Association has taken no position.

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