

Opinion: Calif. wrong not to test students

By George Miller and Russlynn Ali

You don't need a crystal ball to see America's future. Just look inside California's classrooms, where you'll find 1 in 8 American children. How our country does tomorrow depends on how California's schools do today. Will America be ready to compete? Are our students on track for success in college or career? Which schools are doing well and which need improvement?

Last month, Gov. Jerry Brown signed misguided legislation that makes all of those essential questions harder to answer. Under AB484, for the first time in nearly two decades, California won't test all of its students, won't provide data about student performance to parents, teachers or schools, and will not hold itself accountable for raising student achievement.

Brown and Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson heralded AB484 as a modernizing move to implement the new standards known as the Common Core, adopted by California and 44 other states. The theory is that we should throw away the old tests and start a year from now with the new tests, but in the interim we'll stop giving vital information to parents and students. AB484 effectively blindfolds educators during this transition at a time when it's most critical to measure student learning to inform instructional change.

Thoughtful implementation of Common Core is an important issue facing states and school districts across the country. But eliminating testing, even if just for a couple of years, is not the solution. Other states such as New York, Kentucky and Massachusetts are working through this challenge by aligning their testing systems with the new standards and helping

parents understand that, with new assessments, initial drops in test scores are expected. They are making sure students are comfortable with new computer-based assessments, and are helping teachers get ready to use the new testing and evaluation systems, giving them several years before any consequences are tied to new assessments.

These states are making the difficult but necessary transition to higher standards without compromising on important values, like a parent's and a student's right to know how they are performing; a teacher's need to know which students deserve extra attention; whether the rights to equal education are being upheld for students with disabilities and English learners; and the state's responsibility to hold itself, its districts and its schools accountable for student achievement.

Elected leaders in California, instead, have chosen to fly blind for the next few years. And in so doing, they are defying the will of the people. According to a Rossier/PACE poll of California voters, 66 percent of parents with school-age children believe students should be tested in each grade to ensure they are progressing.

California annually receives more than \$3.5 billion in federal funds designed to protect the civil rights of and promote educational opportunity for students. As part of its plan with the federal government to receive those funds, California agreed to assess students annually and report on the performance of poor students, students of color, students with disabilities and English learners. AB484 violates the state's agreements with the federal government, threatening access to the federal funds California relies on to serve its most disadvantaged students.

Worse still, the new law will force districts throughout the state to violate the nation's civil rights statutes, laws the Obama administration is required to enforce. Without the federal government as the guarantor of its people's civil

rights, progress toward equity has historically faltered.

Brown and the Legislature have restored America's largest state to fiscal solvency, even in the middle of the worst economic crisis since the Depression. They deserve credit and our deepest gratitude.

However, we must have an honest conversation about our state's ability to provide a world-class education. California ranks 47th among all states in eighth-grade math, and 45th in fourth-grade reading – and the long-term consequences of drift and delay are incalculable. The Common Core provides the promise and the opportunity for California to again lead the country in education, but not if the state blocks access to student performance data, even for a couple years.

A year is a valuable time in a child's education. That's why we are standing alongside a coalition of California parents, advocates, civil rights leaders, educators and teachers coming together with our lawmakers to rethink AB484. They know this is no time for a blackout on student testing.

Californians have a choice. We can stop assessing our students and schools, and stifle progress, furthering the growing perception that our state's best public education days are behind us. Or we can transition responsibly to new, better standards and uphold California's education system as one that truly serves the needs of all children.

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