

Opinion: Why Calif. keeps failing to grade its schools

By Joe Mathews

Our state's leaders keep asking communities to do more to make our local public schools better—even as they keep us in the dark about how those same schools are doing.

In the 2013-14 school year, the state suspended the Academic Performance Index, or API, the chief tool Californians had for seeing how their kids' schools stacked up among schools across the state. API wasn't a perfect measure, but it offered clear school rankings that could be understood by anyone in your neighborhood—from parents to real estate agents.



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At the time the API was first suspended, our state's leaders said they would give us a more useful index of schools. Three years later, they haven't given us anything at all—except a promise that a new index will be in place for the 2017-18 school year.

I try not to take this personally. The oldest of my three sons started kindergarten in our local elementary in 2014. By the end of 2017-18, he'll be heading into fourth grade—and his two younger brothers will be enrolled.

To be fair, state education officials had many reasons for

creating a new system: the federal government was ditching its No Child Left Behind regime, and California schools were adopting the Common Core and a new local funding formula that gives parents and communities the bureaucratic burden of creating Local Control and Accountability Plans for their schools.

Given all these changes, didn't we need a new index aligned with this new education universe? Of course. So where the hell is it?

The state's answer: such transitions require lengthy consultation, and the State Board of Education is getting closer to putting a new system together. Good to hear. But no changes justify three years—and counting—of keeping Californians in the dark about their schools.

The state had better options. It could have kept the old index alive until it was ready to switch to a new one. Or, even better, the state could have used the previous years to experiment by compiling and releasing to the public a new draft index each year.

Which is why the darkest, most cynical view of this transition is almost certainly the right one. Is the real goal of state leaders less accountability for themselves and for California's public schools?

After all, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson used the API's suspension as justification for failing to publish a legally required list of the state's 1,000 lowest-achieving schools last year. State officials have eliminated half of the standardized tests students are taking; they also have suspended the High School Exit Exam through 2018.

And the California Teachers Association, the state's most powerful teachers' union, has been lobbying hard against producing a statewide index that could be used to rank – or

punish schools. CTA wants districts to have their own local evaluation processes that are aligned with the Local Control and Accountability Plans – which have, unfortunately, proven to be monstrously long and confusing documents.

The union's "statewide ignorance is bliss" logic matches that of Gov. Jerry Brown, who recently told CALmatters that Californians shouldn't expect the state's work to close the achievement gap between black and Latino students and other students. "The gap has been pretty persistent," he said.

Such educational fatalism isn't just dispiriting—it's at odds with California's own record of educational progress. In 2013, more than 80 percent of schools scored above 700 on the API; only 31 percent had scored that high a decade earlier. The same decade saw declines in the dropout rate, more students taking challenging courses (especially math and science), and increases in the school performance of English-language learners and kids from low-income families.

To pressure state leaders, children's advocacy groups are pushing legislation outlining a coherent and comprehensive index that parents and communities can understand. But the teachers' union and some politicians are dismissing this legislation as premature—even though a new system is three years overdue.

State officials will object that this assessment is terribly unfair. But after three years, they've lost the benefit of the doubt. If state officials want to show they're serious about building a useful accountability system, they should take on a make-up assignment: Produce an index of all California schools for each of the past two years—the academic year now ending, and for 2014-15. The state has testing and the other data to do it. And we parents sure could use the information, even belatedly.

But I bet they won't. They're too busy coming up with excuses

for keeping Californians in the dark.

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