



The Bell Policy Center

Research • Advocacy • Opportunity

1801 Broadway, Suite 280
Denver, Colo. 80202
(303) 297-0456 metro Denver
(866) 283-8051 statewide
(303) 297-0460 fax

www.thebell.org

CSAP Is Not Enough

By Andy Hartman

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It is time to acknowledge that Colorado took a wrong turn in designing its school accountability system and to refocus on the original goal: improved student learning.

The Colorado Student Assessment Program is a valuable test, but rating schools simply by aggregating CSAP scores isn't constructive, nor does it provide the range of critical information that educators, policy-makers and parents need to improve teaching and learning. In addition, President Bush's "No Child Left Behind Act of 2001" makes dramatic changes to federal elementary and secondary education programs that will require Colorado to overhaul its system.

We need to go back to the blackboard. The Colorado legislature should immediately place a moratorium on the three-year clock ticking for schools judged unsatisfactory on last year's report cards.

Then, Gov. Bill Owens, legislative leaders and the state Board of Education should appoint a non-partisan blue-ribbon panel to make specific recommendations on how to better use the CSAP and other information to help schools succeed.

In the meantime, the state should continue to provide the public with the information derived from the CSAP but stop issuing meaningless and counterproductive school ratings. If any accountability system is going to improve student achievement, it has to be fair and provide comprehensive information. The current system does neither.

For example, using aggregated CSAP test scores does not take into account the diversity of students, both within and between schools. If a middle school's student body is drawn from very poor neighborhoods with high levels of mobility, does it make sense to compare its performance with a school serving kids from wealthy areas with a more stable student population? Schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods could be making the same - or better - learning gains over the years as more privileged schools, but because one group of students may have entered middle school already behind, their school still receives a poor rating.

Let's explore more productive ways to measure progress and success, rather than having only one remedy - reorganizing or disbanding the school - for a school whose students are not showing adequate learning gains. For example, addressing the school readiness of children through quality preschool and kindergarten programs may be an essential part of the solution for some elementary schools.

In addition, Colorado's current rating system does not meet the criteria for the new "No Child Left Behind" act of 2001, which will take effect in the 2002-2003 school year. The law mandates that test results for schools, districts and the state must be broken down by race, ethnicity, economic status, disability and a variety of other student characteristics - information that is completely lost in the current system of aggregating the results of all students' test scores.

The new law also establishes its own timeline and consequences if schools, districts and the state do not show adequate yearly progress. Colorado's report cards do not get a passing grade.



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A panel comprising Colorado's best and brightest on this issue should be appointed and charged with making specific recommendations to the governor, state board of education, legislature and the public by Dec. 1. This will allow time for the panel to do a thoughtful, thorough job and keep its recommendations out of election-year politics.

At a minimum, the panel should objectively evaluate the current system, study alternatives and factor in the new federal requirements. This approach has the best chance of leading to improvement in student learning.

There is nothing inherent in labeling a school a failure that makes it a better place for learning. And there is nothing acceptable about sitting on the sidelines and watching students struggle. Our kids deserve the best possible chance to succeed. Let's give it to them.

Andy Hartman, Ph.D., is director of policy and research at The Bell Policy Center and former executive director of the National Institute for Literacy in Washington, D.C., and helped write the new federal education law.