



Report to the Little Hoover Commission

Topic: Educational Accountability

By Richard Bray, Superintendent, Tustin Unified School District
President, ACSA Superintendency Council

Question #1: How has the role of the district changed under the accountability/intervention system?

Response: The role of district has evolved, along with tremendous changes in expectations and responsibilities thrust on teachers and principals. Before the accountability movement teachers were paid to teach lessons. It was clearly the student's job to learn the material presented, and the teacher gave chapter tests and quizzes to give students and parents feedback on how well the student was doing. That has completely changed. Now, teachers are paid to assure student learning. The teacher now gives frequent quizzes and assessments to determine what to reteach, and to whom. Each child is expected to master everything.

Not that many years ago, principals managed their schools. Now they continue to manage the school, but serve as highly effective instructional leaders. District leadership has had to learn and teach instructional leadership, using data to drive instructional decisions, teaching to mastery, differentiating instruction, collaboration, and aligning what is taught to what is tested. Districts have also had to learn to be both open and selective to new instructional programs and strategies.

We realized early on that the great truth is that if you do the same thing in the same way, you will get the same result. If the result is not acceptable, then you have to look at doing things differently. We looked at best practices that are getting results, as well as trying research-based strategies that have shown promise. We have found that teachers and principals can only handle so much change at one time. The district must continually determine what changes would produce the most positive results to increasing student learning. Once implemented, they must be monitored to assure we are getting the result desired. The change process is complex, and handling focused change over time has become the highest priority for the superintendent and district office staff.

Society's expectation of K-12 education has changed dramatically—from most students going directly into the world of work after high school to the new expectation that every high school graduate be prepared for college, and most students needing some additional post-secondary training and education. Every student is expected to graduate from high school, even though up through the 1950s only half the students finished high school and only a quarter of them went on to college. Now, in my middle class district, 99 percent finished high school and pass the CAHSEE, and 93 percent go on to college.

Question #2: How are districts reorganizing internally to meet these needs?

Response: Most districts have increased their Curriculum & Instruction division (sometimes also called Educational Services) to meet the need for increased staff development, regular districtwide assessments (benchmark tests), use of data to drive instruction, districtwide pacing plans, collaboration (both vertical and horizontal) and to share and implement best instructional practices.

Larger districts have a Chief Academic Officer to lead this division. Reading, math, science and writing coaches have been hired. Assessment positions have been added to develop benchmark tests and disaggregate data for teacher use.

Districts must also provide a clear common vision to all schools and keep everyone focused on that vision over time. To close the achievement gap, research and experience have shown that the only thing that really works is uniformly high expectations of every student, on every assignment, in every subject. Every child achieving is a vision that must be the consistent focus of the entire district, with leadership on the part of the school board, superintendent, district staff and principals.

Question #3: What are the challenges of implementing interventions and sanctions?

Response: School Assistance Intervention Teams (SAIT) and District Assistance Intervention Teams (DAIT) from the outside have been helpful, especially in smaller districts that have fewer resources at the district level.

However, the short timeline for results is often not realistic, given the demands of the change process. Efforts are further hampered by continual staff turnover, so you are always retraining new staff and never get to full implementation.

Some interventions are one-size-fits-all, which just don't work for some.

Sanctions are punitive and not at all motivating when you are making steady progress on the API (especially with English language learners and special education students), but falling just short of ever-increasing AYP targets. NCLB requires that every child be "proficient" or above by 2014 (college entrance/above grade level) in California. Sanctions can be devastating to hard working staff and present the school as "failing" to the community in spite of the great progress on AYP. You get no credit at all for growth short of the benchmarks.

Having to allow students to transfer out of a program improvement school promotes "white flight" and the transfer of better students.

At the district level there are 38 indicators—38 ways to fail making AYP. Miss any one of the 38 benchmarks and you are a "failing district" and are on track for sanctions. This makes no sense, is unfair and hurts, not helps, districts.

CDE modeling shows that all districts in California will eventually be in program improvement because they will miss AYP by not making one or more of the 38 indicators. There

is no regular public school in California where every student scores proficient or above. This is the hard target and we must be there by 2014; however, it's hopeless. Almost a third of California's 1,000 districts are now in program improvement and will soon face one or more of the seven deadly sanctions—even though their students are doing better every year.

Other states will not face having all of their districts being “failing” Program Improvement schools and districts because they established a more realistic definition of “proficient.” Most states adopted “proficient” levels that, with work, most students, including special education and English learners, could reasonably be expected to achieve. We, on the other hand, set our level of proficient at well above grade level and equivalent to U.C. entrance. We are labeled a failing school or district if we can't get every student to that level by 2014. The target bar rises 11 percent each year between now and 2014, when it hits 100 percent of students at a “proficient” level. While NCLB has problems, California has caused the most profound problem by its unrealistic definition of “proficient.”

Using deciles to separate schools and make value judgments on “good” (decile 7, 8, 9) and “bad” (decile 1, 2, 3) schools is fallacious and just makes no sense. By simply dividing the schools in the state into 10 groups by test scores each year in reality tells you very little. In fact, the schools labeled decile 1, 2 or 3 in 2000 have all made great progress, and their scores today using the 2000 decile cut points would put them in deciles 4, 5 or 6. However, they are still listed as decile 1, 2, and 3 schools because all of the other schools in the state have also improved greatly. So people feel their children are attending a poor school that has not progressed at all because it is still a decile 1, 2 or 3 school. By definition, 30 percent of California schools will always be listed as decile 1, 2 or 3—and its probably the same 30 percent, because the rising tide of student achievement is raising all the boats. Using deciles gives schools no credit for increased student achievement. Deciles should never be used to identify “good” and “bad” schools.

Question #4: Ideas for improvement.

Response: With high stakes, standards-based tests, the key is to closely align what is taught to what is tested. This often has the effect of narrowing the breath of subject matter and is a concern for teachers. Students need to learn about many topics that are not tested. Yet the enormous number of tested standards makes it difficult—probably impossible—to have enough time for students to master all tested standards.

Whatever the link between assessment and sanctions, credit should be given for continuous improvement and multiple measures should be taken into consideration, not just one test. Stair-step growth over time is the hallmark of a successful district and should be recognized.

Sanctions should be employed very selectively and only in situations where the school or district is showing years of no student achievement growth and no real desire or ability to address

the variables that they do control.

Schools should take advantage of Response to Intervention (RtI), which was put into the reauthorization of IDEA by Congress. Almost 300 schools (mostly elementary, with some middle schools) are employing an RtI model in California and it is being successfully implemented all across the country. RtI allows you to restructure your school to use the regular education and special education staff to meet the needs of all kids, whether or not they have been labeled special education. It is a very effective early intervention plan that costs nothing, uses the same texts and instructional materials and really works. It benefits all students, remedial to gifted.

Everyone wants to close the achievement gap and have every child succeed to his or her maximum ability. Good instructional practices and programs benefit all kids, and have therefore not narrowed the gap. Research and experience have shown that the only way to close the achievement gap is universally high expectations—every student doing his or her best work on every assignment, in every subject. I'm sure you can remember a teacher you had growing up who required your very best on every assignment and simply would not settle for anything less. Imagine every teacher doing that. Imagine how good kids would feel about themselves and the pride of knowing that every assignment turned in was their best work. Kids rise to our level of expectation. “Strive for perfection and only settle for excellence” is the motto of many California superintendents, principals and teachers. That said, high expectations alone will not close the gap. There are gaps in societal conditions, such as poverty, crime and access to health care, that must be closed before we can create the conditions where all children can reach those high expectations.

Money is a challenge that limits the range of possible solutions. A longer school day and school year would give teachers the gift of time to effectively teach to mastery the huge number of required (and tested) state standards.

The cost of textbooks has far outstripped the state textbook money provided. Only about half of our textbook needs are met through state textbook funds.

There is more time needed for focused, sustained staff development. Attending one workshop seldom makes a difference in a teacher's instructional performance. Providing ongoing, multi-part, focused training over the course of a year does make a difference. But this takes more than the current three available staff development days.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you. I look forward to talking with you on October 25.

Sincerely,

Richard Bray

Superintendent

Tustin Unified School District