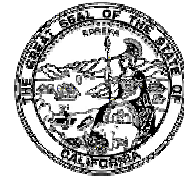




Governor Pete Wilson



Governor Gray Davis

July 7, 2006

Honorable Arnold Schwarzenegger
State Capitol Building
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Governor Schwarzenegger:

It has come to our attention that Sacramento is awash in misinformation about the recent history and intentions of California's school reform strategy. While across the country many look to California's standards as the best, confusion in Sacramento threatens the core of California's program of school reform. Term limits have left Sacramento with little institutional memory of the goals and rationale of California's reforms. As the Governors who led this work, we believe it is time to remind the public of the facts.

In the attachment we have listed some of the incorrect claims being advanced about California's recent experience with standards and accountability and a case-by-case rejoinder that sets the record straight.

To consider the purpose of many of the programs now in place in California, it might be helpful to consider California's history *before* the introduction of standards. When California started down the road to building standards and assessments, there was no standard of excellence throughout California's public school system.

Indeed, national and international test scores released in the early 1990s provided a sobering message about the low overall achievement of California students. The state that once led the nation in education was in the 1990's struggling along at very low levels. State leaders realized that California had much work to do to correct this long slide. Achievement gaps almost certainly existed, but there was no way to measure them and without that, no way to hold schools accountable for changing them. And conversations about appropriate policy quickly turned into ideological warfare because no one had evidence about results. Even if one wanted to look for results, no results were available. While most people knew which schools were problems in each community, there was no mechanism to measure progress or failure.

The need for standards in that environment was clear and compelling: Standards provide a measure of excellence regardless of one's skin color, family income, or zip code. We took a standards-based approach in California because we believe that if we set expectations high, students will respond. Not every child will fully meet the challenge, but all will benefit from the effort.

A standards-and-assessments approach means that no matter which neighborhood or region of the state a child is from, that child should be held to the same high expectations. It means that we will not give up on some children by building a less rigorous program for them. To do so would mean holding them back and limiting their future.

To provide those children a lesser academic challenge would be to insult them and might well cheat them out of realizing their full potential. Instead, when children begin school, we should address whatever deficits in academic readiness they may bring to the classroom through early and effective remedial attention – not by creating an educational apartheid of lesser standards.

Standards also provide a way to measure progress and base decisions on objective evidence, not education fads. And they provide a measurable way to show how California’s public schools are improving over time.

Remarkably, the need for change and the program to bring it about was supported by a bipartisan legislature and developed over the course of several Administrations. The essential ingredients-- the core content standards, curriculum frameworks, instructional materials, and tests aligned to the standards-- are now all in place and provide solid cornerstones for the work that must take place in schools across our great state. For a number of years now, students, parents, educators, and governors have known what is expected, what progress has been made, and what shortcomings still exist. These cornerstones provide much needed stability—more stability than California schools have known in decades.

Many in Sacramento have forgotten or are unfamiliar with this history. Some would suggest that California did better—and would do better again—if we returned to the “good old days” before uniform statewide standards. Although such a system may have served some of California’s students, it clearly failed all too many of them. That system did not expect all students -- no matter their neighborhood -- to attain high levels of academic achievement. In all too many neighborhoods, it produced the “bad old days” of sham and illusion, of social promotion and functionally illiterate high school graduates.


Having rigorous academic standards does not by itself guarantee that the teaching, textbooks, and student effort needed to meet those standards will be there. But the absence of such standards would undoubtedly guarantee that far too many of our schools and our children would fail to fulfill their potential.

Further steps need to be taken to make sure that each student who enrolls in a California public school receives a high quality education which prepares that student for success in a rapidly changing world. But through California’s rigorous academic standards and accountability system, the foundation is solidly in place.

Undoing California’s present high academic standards would be a disastrous step backward. It would leave far too many children woefully unprepared for the challenges and demands they will face in today’s ever more fiercely competitive global marketplace.

Sincerely,


PETE WILSON
GOVERNOR


GRAY DAVIS
GOVERNOR

For the Record: The History of Standards in California

Assertion: Some have attacked the standards by arguing that the process for creating them was politically manipulated or even hijacked by “ideologically based scholars” such as “fellows” at the conservative Hoover Institution. As a result, those critics would assert, California’s standards do not enjoy broad-based support.

Fact: California’s standards are widely acknowledged as the best and most specific standards in the country and have been adopted in whole or part for use by other states. Parents, teachers, taxpayers and all Californians can view these standards at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/>.

To create these standards, the State Board of Education, working with the State Superintendent and the Legislature, appointed a Standards Commission made up of 36 teachers, principals, higher education representatives, and Californians from the broader community. Of course this work engendered robust debate: something as important standards for learning should not be decided easily. It also attracted national attention as many Nobel Prize winning scholars weighed in, offering the commission counsel. But when the commission brought forward its recommendations for History-Social Science, Science, and English Language Arts, those recommendations were approved essentially unchanged.

Prior to adopting the Mathematics standards, the State Board did make major revisions, but here we should be guided here by the results of their intervention. Groups such as Achieve, the American Federation of Teachers, and the Fordham Foundation have rated California’s mathematics standards as among the best in the country. When Achieve, an organization made up of leading Governors and Business leaders, is asked to help other states develop or evaluate their standards for mathematics, they benchmark to California. The academic leaders who recommended the final revisions for California’s standards were mathematicians from the University of California at Berkeley and Stanford University. Only one member of the 36-member Standards Commission was a Ph.D. scholar from the Hoover Institution.

Assertion: The English Language Arts/ Reading and English Language Development curriculum takes too much time. Too many elementary school students are being taught a curriculum devoid of all subjects except reading and math.

Facts: California’s standards recognize reading fluency as the most critical skills students learn in the early grades. This only makes sense; if students cannot read, they cannot master much else. Hence, the State Board in California has adopted a reading/language-arts curriculum that not only follows the best scientific research on reading instruction, but also is a comprehensive program, encompassing phonics, reading comprehension, vocabulary, speaking and listening, writing (including spelling and grammar), and critical reasoning. So, yes, it is true that California’s reading/language-arts curriculum requires a minimum of 2.5 hours of dedicated attention to these foundational, prerequisite skills in the primary grades. In adopting the reading/language-arts standards and textbooks, the State Board also recognized that English Learners

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(ELs) may need more time than native language speakers; therefore ELs can spend as much as 3½ hours daily on reading/language-arts instruction in the early grades to develop this most essential skill.

But a crucial fact critics ignore is that to ensure that California's intensive focus on reading/language-arts in the early grades does not crowd out other topics, The State Board requires publishers to build reading/language-arts instructional materials in California that included content aligned to California's history and science standards as well as visual and performing arts standards. Put more simply, in the schools using state adopted curricular materials, students in grades K-3 read history and science content as well as literary text as a part of their reading/language-arts curriculum. California's focus on reading ought not "crowd out" other subjects; on the contrary, it uses these important subjects as the content that helps children develop their reading skills.

While many contributed to the creation of this aligned system of teaching and learning, we should especially acknowledge the countless hours spent by California teachers to create and review this system of instructional materials. In fact, the plurality of the advisory committees to the Curriculum Commission and the State Board are hard-working classroom teachers who played leading roles in developing the criteria and reviewing the materials that are used throughout California schools.

Assertion: California teachers are "prohibited from knowing what skills and knowledge the tests will test."

Fact: The California Standards Tests (CSTs) are fully aligned to California standards, so if teachers are teaching to the standards, they are teaching the material that will be tested. CSTs include complex analytical tasks such as reading and comparing two short essays to identify common themes and require students to write essays in grades 4 and 7. (The California High School Exit Exam assesses high school writing.) Each year, a portion of the tests are released to the public, so that teachers and parent can see the types of questions and format of the tests. (Anyone can view these test questions online at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sr/css05rtq.asp>). Teachers and parents receive annual customized reports of their results that highlight the strengths and challenges of their students. It is true that each year, the tests cover a portion of the standards; this is done to keep testing time reasonable. It is also important to note that the test blueprints are available for review and posted on the Internet. And it is true that no one knows *exactly* what is on the tests the students take before it is given; if they did, it wouldn't be a credible test.

Assertion: The State Board is made up of "narrow ideologues... The State Board of Education appoints to the Curriculum Commission only members who are loyal to this ideology also known as the 'one shining path'."

Fact: California's widely respected program of standards, testing, and accountability has been built over the past ten years under the guidance of the State Board of Education, whose membership was appointed by three Governors of different political parties:

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Wilson, Davis, and now Schwarzenegger. Every member of the State Board of Education must be confirmed by an extraordinary 2/3rds vote of the California State Senate. Over these years, this diverse, bipartisan group has included teachers, parents, administrators, local school board members, business leaders, retired educators, and general citizens who have been African American, Asian, Latino, and Caucasian. Some have been parents, others grandparents. They have represented different regions of this diverse state. Over the years, they have agreed and disagreed on many things, as their voting records will show. But, remarkably, despite changes in the parties that occupy the Governor's office, this group has shared a commitment to improve California's schools by rigorous academic content standards and a strong accountability system.

The curriculum commission, whose members are appointed by the Board, the legislature, and the Governor, has enjoyed a similar history of diverse membership and equally robust debate. That debate—and the passion behind it—is the reason California's standards are so exceptional. The meetings of the commission are open to the public and we encourage you to attend.

Assertion: California's low ranking NAEP scores "prove" the system has failed.

Facts: California careened to the bottom long before the standards were introduced. California's NAEP rankings are a measure of a supposed Golden Age to which critics would like us to return; the state plummeted during the years that programs such as whole language and constructivist math were widespread. In fact, since 1994, California has seen slow and steady progress in the growth of those scores, especially when we look at the achievement gaps. For example, California closed the gap between English Learners and fluent English speakers by 5 points from 2002-2003. These differences are more profound when you consider that our results are compared to other states that do not include as many English Learners when they test. California tested 88% of its English Learners while states like Texas tested only 62% of its English Learners and New York tested 70%. Similar "who gets tested" gaps exist for Special Education students across the states.

Assertion: The move to standards and accountability is driving teachers out of the profession and into early retirement.

Facts: There is no evidence to support the assertion that teachers are leaving the profession or retiring earlier than in previous decades. The numbers of teachers who remain committed to their jobs remains strong. According to the State Teachers Retirement System's most recent report, the average age of retirements has been remarkable steady. When these trends are considered in the context of labor statistics that show that more and more employees are likely to change careers multiple times over a lifetime, these data show there is considerable stability in the California teaching profession.

Assertion: Data show that California's Reading First program has failed.

Facts:

On the contrary, data show that California's Reading First program is succeeding. First, studies show a consistent trend of increasing percentages of Grade 2 Reading First students who are at the Proficient and Advanced performance-levels on the California Standards Test (CST). In the spring of 2005 this trend was apparent for all three Reading First cohorts (years 1, 2, and 3). Second, the evidence shows that the academic advantage of participating in the Reading First program increases with further time in the program. Third, substantial percentages of Reading First students who were at the lowest CST performance-levels (Below Basic and Far Below Basic) are improving their performance-levels. The same thing has been happening with Reading First students on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT).

Assertion: California Achievement Gaps are growing.

Facts: Like our NAEP scores, California's achievement gaps have been with us longer than the state's program of standards and assessments. That is why the achievement gap has become such a critical focus when we measure school performance. And, like NAEP, the measure of progress, not rank performance, should be our judge. For example, more than any other group, Latino students have made the most impressive gains during this time, growing faster year-to-year than any other ethnic group. The percent of English Learners scoring Early Advanced or above on the ELD assessment in primary grades rose from 21.7% in 2002 to 28.7% in 2004—a 32% increase. The percent of English Learners in grades 4 through 8 scoring Early Advanced or above rose from 39.8% to 55.6% in this same two year period. This is a stunning 39% increase. These gains should give us great hope. They certainly do not support calls for an abrupt course reversal.

Assertion: Performance of California's high schools, combined with the high levels of students required to take remedial coursework when they enter college, are further evidence that the standards have failed.

Facts: It is true that current high school students are our most daunting challenge — their difficulties provides the most concrete evidence of why we must stay the course. Today's high school students began elementary school before the standards were in place; they didn't benefit from improved instructional materials. (Here a brief history is helpful: Academic Content Standards in the four core areas were adopted by 1998. English Language Development Standards were adopted in 1999. The curricular frameworks that provided the guidelines for instructional materials were brought forward in succession. K-8 adoption of instructional materials aligned to these standards was completed with the adoption of Reading/Language-Arts in 2002.) By California law K-8 schools were not required to have such materials until the 2004-05 school year. It is thus a bit of a stretch to blame standards and instructional materials for the very real problems of our high schools.

Assertion: The State Board of Education unfairly limits the choices that schools have for instructional materials

Facts: There are countless tools and resources available to help children learn, but only a few publishing companies that create materials to support comprehensive instructional programs aligned to grade-level core content standards. In the initial K-8 instructional-materials adoptions that were aligned to core content standards, many publishers did not submit materials to California -- Some because the timelines were too short and some because they were not certain the standards would be enforced. Only 3 to 5 publishing companies submit materials for adoption in each subject. In most grades the State Board of Education has adopted 2 to 5 programs, depending upon the number submitted and the number aligned to California's Academic Content Standards. The State provides categorical funding to cover much but not all of the districts' cost to obtain these basic instructional materials. State law and the Williams case settlement emphasize the absolute necessity for each student to have at least basic materials in each subject. State categorical funds for instructional materials by law are to be first used to ensure that this basic need is fulfilled.

Assertion: The instructional programs preferred by the State Board force teachers to follow a script that relies on "drills" to teach children or are too heavily reliant on books to guide instruction.

Facts:

The best research available tells us that while a very few students may learn to master subjects with little guidance, most students require direct teaching and guided skill development to learn the building blocks of reading. (Just as most children won't learn the piano unless they take lessons.) The instructional programs used in California to teach foundation skills such as reading and math provide teachers with teacher manuals, pacing plans, and other tools to help manage classrooms. This approach recognizes that students must build a robust foundation of skills and knowledge in order to seriously engage in critical and analytical thinking or experimentation and these instructional materials are critical tools in this process.

Assertion: California's instructional materials are not designed to support English language learners

Facts: When California adopted its materials for reading/language-arts, it required publishers to create materials in Spanish that are fully aligned to California standards, recognizing that students enrolled in bilingual classrooms deserve a program just as academically rigorous as the programs available in English.

California's English Language Learners may require more time for instruction to ensure that they develop a solid foundation in reading and language skills. Therefore, English Learners may require 60 minutes of focused instruction in addition to the 2.5 hours of reading instruction designated for all students in the early grades.

Assertion: California standards are too high and, by requiring topics such as Algebra, unfairly biased against students who have no interest in college.

Facts: While it was once true that Algebra was only needed for the college-bound, in today's economy, Algebra is the gateway to not only college but to most vocational and technical-training programs that prepare students to earn a professional wage. Of course, there are ample jobs that don't require Algebra, but few such jobs that would support a family. All students should be prepared for the full array of choices ahead of them; those choices should not be made for them by a school system that doesn't ensure that all students are prepared.