

Title: Academic Testing Results: A Reality Check

I saw them approaching as I sat in my warm car somewhere in Yuba County on a chilly morning. I had just pulled over to check my text messages on my way to work.

The gaunt middle-aged man was tightly gripping the bare metal handles of a stripped-down bicycle as he struggled to maintain control. Perched on the handlebars sat a very young boy precariously hanging on as the bike navigated the potholes and tufts of yellow grass growing between cracks in the asphalt. While other children were in climate-controlled vehicles, here was a man, most likely a father, taking his son to elementary school – on a bike. Getting his son to school was that important.

The recent release of abysmally low test scores on standardized tests for English Language Arts and Mathematics was both revealing and painful. My initial gut reaction was ‘*come again?*’ after reading the terse explanations in the media. No, this is much more than a *snapshot*. It’s a reality check. Clearly, the father with the child on the handlebars deserves more.

At the risk of oversimplifying, back in 2012 an adoption and implementation process began for various aspects of the new rigorous California State Standards. Over the last five years this complex undertaking has challenged educators in the field. Simply put, curriculum that was aligned to those standards was not rolled out until 2014 and 2015. Similarly, the Smarter Balance Assessments in English Language Arts and Mathematics were not initiated until spring 2015. Fast forward, just this year the California Dashboard, part of the new school accountability system, made its debut.

In response, educators have contented with ‘bridging materials’, new teaching methodologies, a reexamination of resource allocations, and a new funding mechanism known as the Local Control Funding Formula. Get the picture? As any seasoned teacher will tell you, this years-long *lesson plan*, as designed, has yielded exactly the test results reported. To be clear, dedicated educators continue to grapple with these transformative changes.

Given that between sixty to seventy per cent of students did not meet the standards, no amount of public understatement will detract from or blunt the obvious. Moreover, while the School Accountability Report Card shows exemplary graduation rates for number of schools, approaching 95% in some cases, a closer look reveals that up to 70% of graduating seniors do not complete A-G requirements for admission to state universities. Clearly, this finding carries serious implications for workforce readiness and the long-term economic vitality of a community.

I’ve often noted that one doesn’t drown by falling in water. One drowns by staying there. We’re now in deeper water and farther from shore. Things need to change for our children, especially our most needy – and we have plenty of them in our part of the state.

So what can we do as a community? First and foremost, get involved on local education committees and governing boards that help shape the Local Control Accountability Plans for school districts. Dare to research and ask questions about other communities with similar demographics who are reporting higher academic gains. Yes, they do exist in California.

Ultimately, the academic testing revelations may move parents to question their implicit faith in schooling and get involved on deeper level beyond funding raising, awards ceremonies, and sports. To acquiesce to lower academic outcomes is just not an option. And rationalizing the scores in curt and cryptic sound bites and euphemisms will only bleed the public’s faith in our educational institutions. Faith is an abstract but very powerful human force. It’s not complicated.

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Article published in the Appeal Democrat, October 2017

