

Opinion: Test scoring of schools dismantled in California

By Dan Walters

dwalters@sacbee.com

Slowly, quietly – but unmistakably – California’s education establishment is dismantling or softening state and federal testing-based “accountability” systems that were imposed on public schools more than a decade ago.

Those standards, both the state Academic Performance Index (API) and the federal government’s No Child Left Behind measures, have used testing to gauge how schools were meeting academic achievement standards.

Those that lagged faced financial and managerial sanctions, including, potentially, “parent triggers” to convert failing schools into parent-run charter schools. The accountability measures also fed a drive among some school reformers for grading teachers’ competency.

The education establishment, including administrators, teachers, unions and many district trustees, has never made a secret of its disdain for what’s been termed “punitive accountability,” saying it’s a poor way of encouraging improvement.

The state accountability regime has been suspended, supposedly to be revised and improved. The committee that’s rewriting the API has recommended that it no longer contain a single three-digit number and use “multiple measures” to align it with the new Common Core standards and Gov. Jerry Brown’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).

Policy Analysis for California Education, a school think tank, puts it this way: “The new system is grounded in the concept of reciprocal accountability: that is, every actor in the system – from the Capitol to the classroom – must be responsible for the aspects of educational quality and performance that it controls.”

Meanwhile, for the second straight year, the state is seeking a federal waiver from being graded on results of recently revised academic tests.

Without the precise numbers that both accountability systems generated, however, hard consequences for low achievement also may disappear. The “parent trigger” and other interventions may remain in law, but the data that have driven them could disappear.

Los Angeles Unified at one point flatly proclaimed exemption from parent trigger due to the federal waiver, then reversed itself after a change of superintendents.

Without being explicit, Brown seems to be taking the side of those who want to shun the two accountability systems.

He and his chief education adviser, state Board of Education president Michael Kirst, have stiffed efforts by education reformers to put more explicit standards and accountability measures in the LCFF, saying they trust local school officials and parents to make sure its extra money is spent wisely on poor and English-learner students.

That “flexibility” pleases the education establishment, but reformers worry that without a strong testing and accountability regime, the extra money will be diffused into other purposes, such as salary increases.

Call The Bee’s Dan Walters, (916) 321-1195. Back columns, sacbee.com/dan-walters. Follow him on Twitter @WaltersBee.