

Dan Walters: How do we grade our schools?

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The state Board of Education, for the umpteenth time, heard presentations Thursday about a new method of gauging how well public schools are educating 6-plus million kids.

As usual, they were couched in opaque educational jargon, such as “evaluation rubrics,” “multiple measures” and “a flashlight not a hammer.”

And as usual, education reform groups were critical of replacing the Academic Performance Index, an annual test-based score given to schools, with something that, they said, would make it more difficult for parents and public to know what’s happening.

The educational establishment, including powerful teacher unions, despises the API, saying it’s simplistic and encourages teaching to the test. It also is a basis for parents to intervene and even take over poor-performing schools, which the establishment also dislikes.

The official rationale for dumping the API, which has been suspended and is almost certain to be erased, is that it’s out of sync with new Common Core standards and the new Local Control Funding Formula, which provides extra money to school districts with concentrations of “high-needs” poor and English-learner students.

The state Department of Education will release initial results of “Smarter Balance” tests aligned with Common Core standards in English and math next week, and the results are widely expected to show huge shortfalls in what kids have learned.

The biggest conflict in the work-in-progress accountability system is how prominent a role results of the new tests will play in assessing how school districts are spending the targeted LCC funds.

“As proposed,” EdVoice President Bill Lucia told the board in a letter prior to Thursday’s meeting, “the rubrics omit critical data and limit the authority of policy makers to exercise new authorities to identify schools in need of improvement and intervene when a school district has academically failed its students.”

Unless they make test results an integral measure in the new system, Lucia warned, the board would be ignoring a key provision of the LCFF law and “essentially repealing any notion of accountability for actual academic outcomes.”

Children Now offered similar, if less direct, criticism to the board, telling members that since LCFF assumes that parents will be active in monitoring how its extra money is spent, “they need simple, clear and easy-to-understand data on the school’s and the district’s performance.”

Enforcing tight accountability standards, including academic testing, is the “hammer” that the education establishment dislikes. Its members prefer the “flashlight” approach that uses performance data to encourage improvement, with intervention by authorities as a rare last resort.

Conflicts over developing a new accountability system will continue for many months, culminating late next year. And if education reformers are unhappy with the outcome, they may, as Lucia’s letter hints, take the battle into the courts.