

## Dan Walters: California's kids fall short in testing once again

By Dan Walters

[dwalters@sacbee.com](mailto:dwalters@sacbee.com)

The latest national academic tests tell us again that California's public schools aren't doing a very good job of educating more than 6 million youngsters.

Once again, California finds itself in the bottom tier, with New Mexico and Alabama, in the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) tests of fourth- and eighth-graders in math and English.

But if our schools aren't performing particularly well, those who run the schools are again demonstrating their unmatched ability to make excuses for failure.

In the past, their rationales have included inadequate financing and having to contend with a student population heavily weighted toward poor and English-learner students.

But as this year's results demonstrated anew, those excuses collide with the fact that states with similar demographic profiles and even lower levels of spending, such as Texas, surpass California in NAEP test scores.

A new excuse emerged this week as the scores were released. Bill Ainsworth, a spokesman for state schools Superintendent Tom Torlakson, pointed out that the NAEP test standards are not completely aligned with the Common Core standards that California has embraced.

"Consequently, we do not believe they are a good measure of California students," Ainsworth wrote in an email.

That seems to have a certain validity. But we should remember that when the first round of state tests aligned with Common Core standards were released a few weeks ago, they showed relatively low levels of achievement as well.

Moreover, Torlakson and others in the education establishment are clearly reluctant to have results of the Common Core-aligned tests play a prominent role in the new system of accountability now being developed by the state Board of Education.

Holding teachers and administrators strictly accountable for how well their students are doing vis-à-vis Common Core is a no-no in the "multiple measures" system being drafted to evaluate a new school finance system that provides extra money to help low-achieving poor and English-learner students.

That attitude irritates school reform and civil rights groups, which fear that without such accountability, extra money will be squandered rather than focused on the targeted kids, more than half of K-12 students.

Underlying the jousting over test scores and accountability measures is adamant opposition by the California Teachers Association and other unions to using test results in teacher evaluations, even though a state law, the Stull Act, has mandated such evaluations for more than 40 years.

The law has been largely ignored, and Students Matter, one of the reform groups, is suing 13 districts for violating the Stull Act by signing contracts with teacher unions that prohibit test scores from being used in evaluations.

The unions made a concerted effort in the Legislature this year to repeal the Stull Act but so far have failed.

The latest NAEP scores provide more fodder for the conflict.