

## *Exit-exam delay no surprise*

*As long as teachers union maintains clout, real school reform is unlikely.*

*By Dr. Alan Bonsteel, Orange County Register,  
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On June 13, state schools chief Jack O'Connell made an unsurprising announcement: He would seek to postpone California's high school exit exam, due to become mandatory in 2004, by at least two years. Even though the exit exam is really set at about an eighth-grade level - not the reported 10th-grade level - initial test results suggested that well over one-third of next year's seniors would flunk the exam. O'Connell said disadvantaged kids currently getting a substandard education needed more time to prepare.

In the bigger picture, without fundamental reform of how California's public schools operate, we will never have a meaningful exit exam. That's because the most powerful force influencing state public schools is the California Teachers Association, which has contributed to the campaigns of a majority of both houses of the Legislature, as well as Mr. O'Connell.

In an era of great public support for education reform, the CTA adamantly opposes ending the tenure that protects incompetent public-school teachers, opposes testing of teachers and opposes achievement tests to document how much students learn.

As a result of the CTA's influence, the only test applicants have to pass to become a teacher in California is CBEST, which is decidedly less difficult than the current high school exit exam. For example, the exit exam contains at least some rudimentary algebra, while CBEST contains none. As easy as the test is, 20 percent of teachers currently teaching in California have failed CBEST at least once.

Why in the world would we expect our kids to be able to pass a high school-level examination when we don't demand the same of their teachers?

Unfortunately, there is considerable complacency about our schools, spurred in some cases by scores on California's yearly STAR tests of academic performance. What parents may not realize is that the STAR questions change little from year to year, and are well-known to teachers, who can prepare students with specifics from the actual test. Thus, test scores have climbed every year since STAR's inception. By contrast, California scores on more secure tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the SAT have been largely flat and discouragingly low. That's why the current exit exam debacle is no surprise to informed observers.

The miserable performance of our high school students on standardized examinations is more disheartening still in light of our deplorable 33 percent dropout rate. The kids we're

losing to dropping out are the lowest performers academically. If there were some way to round up the dropouts and test them as well, the meltdown of our public schools would be that much more obvious.

Meanwhile, in Milwaukee, the home of the oldest voucher program in the United States, disadvantaged kids are outperforming their counterparts in public schools with about two-thirds of the per-student funding. School violence rates have gone down, and parental satisfaction has soared.

Earlier this year, Colorado passed a K-12 school-choice program, the nation's fourth publicly supported voucher program. At least three other states are on the verge of passing school choice.

By contrast, here in California, other than our charter-school law, we have almost nothing that gives parents meaningful options for their children's' education, despite having some of the nation's most deplorable public schools.

If state schools chief Jack O'Connell wants to give our disadvantaged kids a chance to learn, perhaps he might consider advocating a ticket to a better education for these kids: a voucher.

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