

Falling STAR

Orange County Register Orange Grove

By

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Last week's STAR K-12 test results demonstrate that the system sucks in vast amounts of data, but releases virtually nothing of value.

A common statewide examination system, such as California's Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program, is critical to assess educational progress, but STAR's integrity is so deeply flawed that it most closely resembles a black hole.

STAR's main component, the Stanford 9, is an off-the-shelf, nationally available test disconnected from California's curriculum that will finally be replaced this year.

To cite the most extreme example of the disconnect between what it tests and what teachers are supposed to teach, it tests American and world history in the reverse order in which they are taught in California. STAR thus provides an incentive for teachers to ignore our curriculum and to teach to the test. Security on the Stanford 9 was breached from the outset. With the test passing through the hands of hundreds of thousands of teachers, it only took a few bad eggs making photocopies before the test became easily available for all. Available for purchase in other states in an almost identical form to which it has been given here, the Los Angeles Times has even printed exact test questions from the STAR. Moreover, the questions have never been changed since its inception in 1998. Even the newer California Standards Tests, keyed to state curriculum, only change half their questions each year despite distributing hundreds of thousands of exams annually.

STAR, in contradiction to state law, is the only component of the misnamed Academic Performance Index (API). Created in 1999, the "index" was to consider not just test scores, but also dropout and attendance rates.

The California Department of Education is now awarding prizes of up to \$25,000 for teachers who improve their students' test scores. Not surprisingly, cheating scandals have sprung up all over the state. Last year California's independent Legislative Analyst's Office concluded, "Providing \$677 million in rewards based solely upon this test creates incentives for schools to misuse their knowledge of Stanford 9 test questions."

High school performance, the bottom line for the K-12 system, is particularly disturbing because the weakest students are either dropping out before they even take the test in their junior year or simply are not taking the exams. One in three California entering ninth-graders drops out before graduation. This ought to provide a tremendous boost to the percent that are performing at grade level.

For example, for the Class of 2003 between the sophomore and junior years, 11 percent fewer took the SAT 9 exam statewide. Yet despite the huge upward bias, the numbers at grade level rose only 3 percent and 2 percent respectively in reading and math and declined 3 percent in science. Only 86 percent of enrolled juniors even took the California Standard exam in English/Language Arts.

Even with these distortions, only one in three entering the final year of K-12 education reached the target of "proficient."

Yearly we fall further behind society's needs for higher levels of knowledge and skills in all students as we try to teach this outmoded, state-controlled pig of a monopoly to sing.

Reams of studies document that kids of all ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds can achieve consistently high levels, but not within a system little changed in a hundred years and motivated by full employment for bureaucrats rather than what is right for the kids.
How much longer are we supposed to wait for genuine reform?