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Editorial

California education bill gets an A

SB 547 improves on California's current yardstick for measuring improvement in schools in important ways.

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California's system for measuring improvement in schools was always better than the federal government's, and a bill by state Senate leader Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) would enhance it in some long-overdue ways, perhaps providing a national model for school accountability.





SB 547, which has passed the Senate and deserves to become law, would still use test scores as one of the major yardsticks for improving schools, but it would add other important factors: graduation rates and the readying of students for college or careers. If implemented correctly, the bill also could encourage schools to shift away from what has become an overemphasis on test-oriented "drill and kill" in basic subjects.

The lack of emphasis on dropout rates has been the shame of school accountability systems. The single-minded focus on testing actually gives schools an incentive to encourage their lowest-achieving students to leave so they won't drag down schoolwide results. This bill would fix the problem; schools could not get high ratings for raising test scores while dropout numbers were increasing.

One of the more recent maxims in the school reform movement has been about preparing all students for a four-year college; in California, this means putting them through the so-called A-G curriculum, a set of courses required for the University of California and California State University. But not all students are interested in attending college, and not all of them should. Steinberg rightly notes that what most students will need in order to qualify for a satisfying and well-paid job is some education after high school, whether college or vocational training. So his bill would measure high schools by how well they prepare students for either one of those. As legislators consider the bill, they might find ways to improve it, such as by adding a more meaningful measure of college readiness than how many students take the A-G course; it should also include their scores on the [Early Assessment Program](#) measurement developed by CSU, which determines whether students are on track to succeed at the state colleges.

For younger students, SB 547 calls for the state to measure something beyond tests, but it is intentionally vague, leaving the details to a committee within the state Department of Education, with approval by the state Board of Education. The plan is that the committee would devise ways to encourage schools to provide a more enriched education with, say, arts offerings. The bill should call for enrichments at all grade levels. Public school instruction has become narrower and flatter as a result of the largely multiple-choice tests at the core of school accountability. Less emphasis is given to projects that teach students to research, analyze and write. If the bill passes, as it should, the next responsibility would fall to the committee: It should reward schools that bring these valuable lessons back to the classroom.

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