

## INTRODUCTION

### Back to School in California—and Back to This Question: Does the State's K–12 System Deserve a Passing Grade?

By Bill Whalen

If you're looking to grade public education in California, pass-fail probably isn't the way to go but make sure to leave plenty of room in the "comments" section of your report card.

On the one hand, the system has bred success. The late Steve Jobs was a product of California's K–12 system. He attended nationally recognized Homestead High School, which is part of the San Francisco Bay Area's Fremont Unified School District (as did Steve Wozniak, who was introduced to Jobs by another Homestead grad, Bill Fernandez, who'd later become the [first Apple employee after the two Steves](#)).

But that was back in the early days of the 1970s, when Ronald Reagan was governor and life was simpler (the median price of a California home [was less than \\$27,000](#)).

It doesn't excuse the fact that today's California public schools have some explaining to do.

Last August, nearly 3.2 million students at more than 11,000 K–12 schools statewide took computerized tests in math and English to see [if they were on track for college](#) as per the Common Core State Standards.

The results? Brace yourself.

- Just 48 percent of students met or exceeded English standards.
- Only 37 percent could handle the math.

Some California schools statistics are even more ulcer inducing.

For example, [a recent study of California educational data](#) reveals that 75 percent of black boys in the state failed to meet the state's reading and writing standards.

Other stats suggest that K–12 schools aren't addressing social and cultural divides. Five years ago, a team of University of California researchers interviewed students at an upper elementary school (that's grades 4–6) school in urban Southern California and found that a majority of the kids asked didn't know that hamburgers came from cows, cheese is made from milk and onions, and lettuce is a plant.

How to remedy the situation?

In California's state capital, the conversation inevitably centers on money. Again, it's a subjective debate.

California's recently enacted [2017–18 state budget](#) devotes \$54.2 billion to K–12 education. Add higher education and the total is \$69.6 billion: three out of every eight dollars the state will spend between now and next July.

Let's put that in the context of California's fiscal priorities.

K–12 outlays finish \$6 billion shy of what the Golden State will spend on health and human services (\$60.275 billion) in the current fiscal year. But it's four times more than

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transportation spending (nearly \$13 billion) and seventeen times what California will devote to environmental protection (\$3.186 billion).

Now, the flip side of the argument: that all those dollars aren't enough.

Depending on how one does the math—fiscal outlays, California's exorbitant cost of living, and so on—America's nation-state [ranks anywhere from twenty-second to forty-sixth nationally in K–12 spending](#).

There's also a potential “[tidal wave](#)” coming: K–12's salary increases, ballooning health benefits, and pension obligations that potentially could cripple local school districts which already are at the inconsistent revenue stream produced by California's boom-or-bust economy.

It's easy to be overwhelmed [by the sheer magnitude](#) of public education in California. The Golden State's home to more than 6.2 million students and nearly 300,000 teachers in 10,453 various forms of public schools, not counting the nearly 575,000 more students in more than 1,200 charter schools.

It's an army of young learners, about fourteen times the size of today's US Army; roughly the same size as the army at the height of the Second World War. If California's student population were to secede (gee, [there's an original thought](#)), it would be America's fourteenth-largest state—just past Arizona and closing in on Massachusetts.

It would take multiple editions of this publication and a lot of Internet bandwidth to summarize all the concerns

### Current Total CA Students vs. 1945 U.S. Army



6.2 Million

8.2 Million

Source: [California Department of Education](#)

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regarding the future of education—and education reform—in California.

One could start with the California Teachers Association's death grip on the legislature, which produces sad outcomes such as [the smothered-in-the-cradle attempt](#) at seriously addressing teacher tenure in the Golden State.

This summer legislators didn't pass on a chance to engage in a little apple-polishing with the teaching profession. Sacramento kicked around a variety of extra perks for instructors: tax breaks, affordable housing, and expanding maternity benefits.

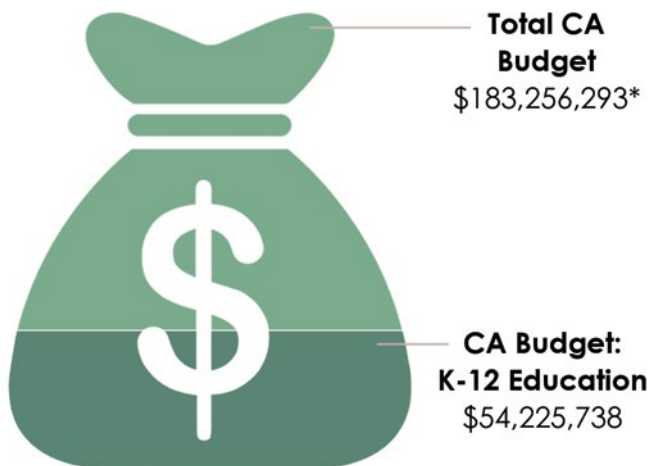
Meanwhile, there's heavy political [turnover coming Sacramento's way](#). The November 2018 election, owing to term limits, will produce a new governor and superintendent of public instruction, as well as the expected departure of the president of the California State Board of Education. Look for a public debate over financing laws and formulas, plus various reforms having to do with standards, curriculum, and teacher preparation and performance.

While we're on the topic of turnover, keep an eye on [faculty lounges](#) during the next decade: in the 2015–16 schools, one-third of all California teachers were age fifty and older.

For this installment of *Eureka*, we've lined up five policy experts who'll look at various aspects of California education: both what's alarming and what shows signs of promise.

Our contributors are:

Paul Peterson, a Hoover Institution senior fellow and editor in chief of *Education Next*, analyzes the results of a survey



\*Dollard in Thousands  
Source: [California Department of Finance](#)

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that shows California teachers concerned about their peers' performance.

Erik Hanushek, the Hoover Institution's Paul and Jean Hanna Senior Fellow, looks at California's inability to address teacher tenure and its effect on producing an adequate instate workforce.

Williamson Evers, a Hoover research fellow and past US assistant secretary of policy, looks at California's adaptation of a new history curriculum that conveniently overlooks some progressive sins of the past.

Caprice Young, charter school advocate and chief executive of Magnolia Public Schools, explains the significance and long-term potential of the Los Angeles Unified school board now consisting of a pro-charter majority.

Marshall Tuck, a Southern California education reform activist and candidate for state superintendent of public instruction, lays out the argument for decentralizing California school policy.

We hope you enjoy this latest installment of *Eureka*—and that it gets you thinking about where California stands and whether we're moving in the right direction.

Happy reading!

Bill Whalen is a Hoover Institution research fellow, primarily studying California's political trends. From 1995 to 1999, Bill served as Chief Speechwriter and Director of Public Affairs for former California Governor Pete Wilson.

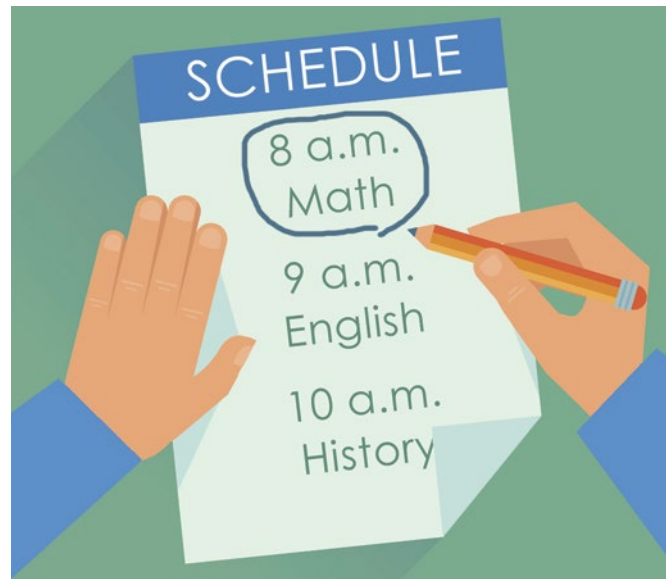


## FEATURED COMMENTARY

### California's Board of Education Ignores Teacher Effectiveness—but One in Ten Teachers Are Ineffective, Claim Fellow Instructors

By Paul Peterson

Ever since a California superior court determined three years ago that teacher tenure and seniority rights concentrated inexperienced teachers in disadvantaged communities (*Vergara v. California*), the state's Board of Education has been trying hard not to think about teacher effectiveness. An appeals court overturned the lower court decision, but the state board remains worried about other legal and political attacks.



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[The Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (ESSA), a federal law signed by President Obama in December 2015, requires that every state, to receive federal funds, inform the US Department of Education whether ineffective teachers are concentrated in schools with disadvantaged students.

In July California's Board of Education decided to duck the problem. Taking the advice of the California Teachers Association, the board decided that holding the right credentials makes a teacher effective. But "the mark of an effective teacher should be their ability to help students learn," says Ryan Smith, executive director of Education Trust West, an education-minded civil rights group based in Oakland.

Still, if the board sticks to its plan when it submits its final plan to Washington this September, effectiveness in California will mean nothing other than sitting in the appropriate education classes at college. Ting Sun, a member of the state board, sighs, "[The whole ineffective teacher definition gives me heartburn.](#)"

The California board denies what California parents and teachers both know and are willing to admit. More than 10 percent of state teachers are performing at an unsatisfactory level, they say. I've learned this from [the eleventh annual survey](#) of a representative sample of the American public conducted in May and June of this year under the auspices of *Education Next*, a journal of opinion and research published by Harvard University.

Because my colleagues and I surveyed 4,200 members of the public, with an oversampling of parents and teachers, we were able to gather information from a representative

sample of 523 Californians, including 276 parents and 75 teachers. (The survey was administered by Knowledge Networks, an online polling firm.)

Among the results were the following:

- Both parents and teachers praise nearly two-thirds of California's teachers. The average parent said 63 percent of teachers at their local school were good or excellent; the average teacher said the same about 64 percent of their colleagues at their local school.
- Nonetheless, the average parent told us that 15 percent of teachers were "unsatisfactory." Teachers themselves, on average, said the percentage was 11 percent.

With only 75 teachers in our California sample, our estimate is imprecise. But it is probably close to the mark because our national sample of 669 teachers yields exactly the same teacher estimate of the percentage of their colleagues they deem unsatisfactory: 11 percent.

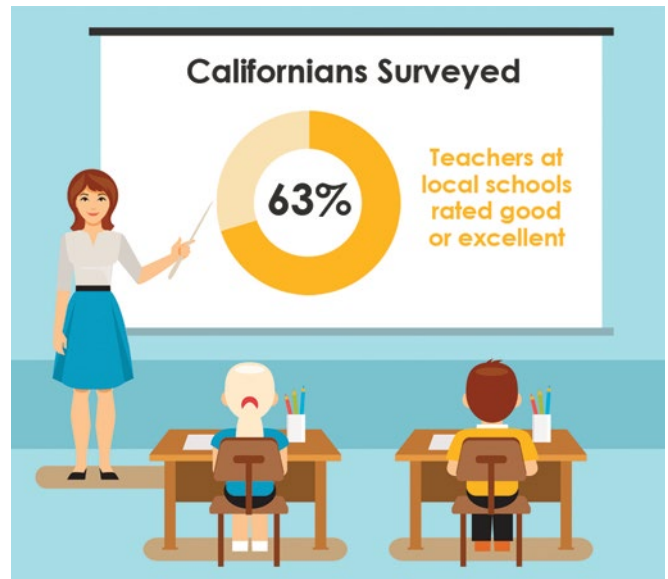
This is germane to one of the more distressing aspects of education in the Golden State: California students are among the lowest performing in the United States. According to [the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\)](#), California ranked among the ten worst-performing states in both reading and math at both the fourth- and eighth-grade level. In fourth-grade reading California edged out only New Mexico.

Apologists will try to explain California's low performance by pointing to the waves of immigrants coming into the state. Yet if one looks at the fourth- and eighth-grade performances on the NAEP of only California's white and black students, the picture remains bleak. When performances on these tests are combined, California's white students trail those in Massachusetts by one year's worth of learning in both reading and math, on average. The same is true for California's black students.

Of all school characteristics, teacher quality is the one that has the largest impact on student performance. If one could replace the least effective teachers with one of simply average quality, California schools could move from mediocre to the very best. Unless California takes its head out of the sand and addresses the quality of its teaching force, its educational system will remain mediocre at best.

Our survey also asked Californians about merit pay, teacher tenure, and teachers unions.

Just about half the public opposes teacher tenure (two years after beginning work California teachers can earn tenure or be dismissed); only a third like the idea (with the remainder saying they neither support nor oppose the idea).



Source: [Education Next](#)

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When it comes to basing a part of teachers' salaries on "how much their students learn," Californians are just about equally divided—40 percent taking each side, with the rest taking the neutral position.

As for teachers unions, about 40 percent of Californians think they are a positive force, 35 percent think they have had a negative impact, and the balance take a neutral view.

On these issues and others, opinions about schools and school policy in California resemble those of people across the United States.

(For results from the 2017 survey of a nationally representative sample of American adults on a wide range of education issues, see our analysis at [Education Next](#). That includes an interactive graph that displays results for the general public as well as for parents, teachers, Republicans, Democrats, and other groups.)

Paul E. Peterson, a Hoover Institution senior fellow, is also a professor of government at Harvard University where he directs the Program on Education Policy and Governance. In addition, he serves as senior editor of *Education Next*.







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### CALIFORNIA K–12 AND VOX POPULI



During the past four Januarys, Hoover's Golden State Poll asked Californians to list their policy priorities for state government. K–12 education's position among twenty options is no worse than eighth place and no better than fourth, with a consistent 45 to 50 percent of respondents giving it top billing. Strengthening the economy always topped K–12; education consistently trumped climate change and the environment. The last time K–12 heavily affected the political conversation in California was 2012's Proposition 30, which raised sales and income taxes (on high-end earners) under the guise of bringing relief to schools financially strapped by Great Recession budget cuts. The ballot measure's logo was a white 30 superimposed on a red teacher's apple.

### TEACHING IS BLISS?

Every year, the online jobs site Careerbliss.com comes out with a list of "happiest jobs in America" based on employee reviews (it also does happiest companies and happiest cities in which to work). In third place, behind marketing specialist and job recruiter, was graduate teaching assistant: helping grad professors in various capacities, including possibly lecturing classes. As is often the case with teaching jobs, it's more a labor of love than profit: the average annual salary doesn't top \$30,000. The same site also compiles a list of "unhappiest" jobs. The good news is teaching didn't make the cut—just a bunch of jobs on the receiving end of abuse: customer service reps, cashiers, registered nurses, and administrative assistants.

But with pressures to reduce immigration in general and with the increasing expense of living in California, the ability to attract high-skill workers into California may decline. Regardless, even if the current level of in-migration can be sustained, locally educated students remain the majority of those from which the future labor force is drawn.

In that regard, California could be headed for trouble.

When [states are ranked](#) against one another by student performance on national tests, California falls in the bottom five to ten states, depending on the subject of the test. Of course, as many are quick to point out, California has an unusually hard-to-educate population. For example, [more than half of all students](#) in public elementary and secondary schools are Hispanic, suggesting that poverty and language issues may be particularly important in California. Nonetheless, comparing just Hispanic students across the states, California falls in the bottom five of states. (For comparison, Hispanics in Texas—a state with much the same demographics as California—place in the top five states of the nation.)

Some say that scores on standardized tests are inconsequential and do not indicate anything important. However, this isn't the case. [Individuals who have higher skills](#) as indicated by these standardized tests will on average earn more throughout their lifetime.

Perhaps more important, these tests of students indicate the skills to be found in the future labor force of the state. Research shows that the [skills of workers in each state](#) are closely related to the evolution of the state economy. In

## The Future of Teacher Quality in California Is in Doubt—and That Also Puts California's Economic Outlook in Jeopardy

By Eric Hanushek

California's [economy](#)—on a pace this year to potentially surpass the United Kingdom [as the world's fifth largest](#)—will likely become more and more dependent on the quality of its home-produced labor force. In that regard, storm clouds are on the horizon.

California can possibly, as it has in the past, attract workers from other states and from other countries. That approach has been successful in augmenting its labor force in the past, although it might be less successful in the future.



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simplest terms, states with a more skilled labor force grow faster than those with fewer skilled workers.

Where can California go to improve on its student performance (and thus its long-term labor force)? There are no simple and easy answers, such as “just buy the right textbook.”

There are, nevertheless, answers.

Research shows conclusively that the most important element of schools is the quality of the personnel: the teachers and the leadership.

There's little dispute about the [impact](#) of either the best teachers or the worst teachers. A good teacher can dramatically change the careers of her students, as can a bad teacher, but in the opposite direction.

To set the scene, it's valuable to provide a better idea of the importance of the issue. [Research](#) has shown that the best teachers can produce an extra half year of learning each academic year; the worst cost their students one-half year less. In other words, in one academic year, two students in neighboring classrooms can end up a full year's different in achievement just by the luck of classroom placement. The previous differences are found within urban schools serving disadvantaged children; they suggest that three to four years with a good teacher are sufficient to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and more advantaged students.

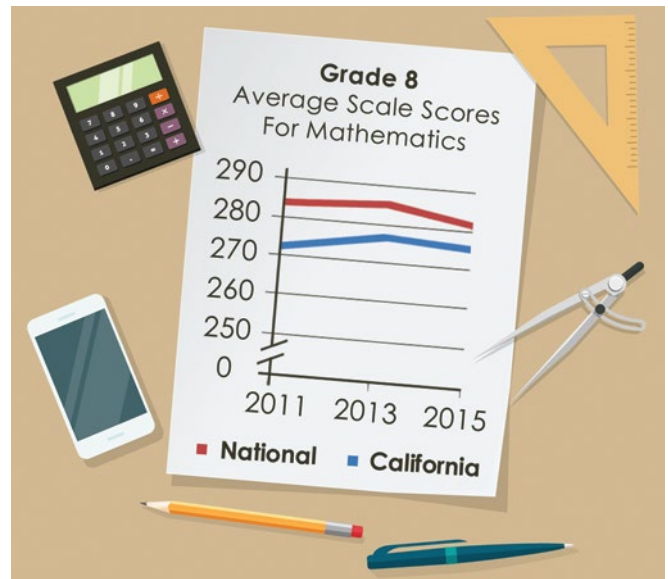
Yet knowing the importance of teacher quality does not provide a clear set of policies that the state should pursue. It's not possible simply to write a law declaring that only good teachers can be in the classroom because the law would have to specify how to define a good teacher and to develop a set of policies to ensure that only good teachers so defined are in the classroom. Those steps are currently beyond our current ability.

To address teacher quality issues, two very different strategies have been proposed and pursued. Let's weigh both.

One strategic approach, which is dominant although not successful across the states, is to ensure that only highly qualified teachers can get into the classroom; in fact, it was part of the previous national accountability system, [No Child Left Behind](#) (NCLB).

This strategy has many components. A key element is putting a floor on the preparation of teachers that is permissible. That would include possibly testing potential teachers for subject matter knowledge, requiring masters' degrees, and emphasizing majoring in subject matter fields.

Part of the idea behind making it more difficult to get into teaching, besides just restricting the number of those who can



Source: [National Center for Education Statistics](#)

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teach, is elevating the prestige of the field. The chief objective is getting the right people into the field and then treating them with respect and making their career rewarding.

In principle, there's nothing wrong with this objective.

But it just hasn't worked.

The second strategy takes a different tack, arguing that we don't really [know how to describe](#) the characteristics and background of an effective teacher.

Although we can observe which teachers do the best job, we don't know the training, experience, or other characteristics that identify differences in them compared to teachers doing the worst job. As such, we can't easily describe what is necessary to have good teachers; thus it is very difficult if not impossible to ensure having good teachers.

An alternative is to make it easier, not harder, to enter teaching but then to make it harder to stay in teaching if the effectiveness is not high. This approach builds on the observation that it is possible to judge the effectiveness of teachers after they've been in the classroom, even if it is difficult to assess who might be effective before they get into the classroom.

The current system, as practiced in California, goes to the traditional but ineffective direction and has proven even less successful than the policies in most other states. It makes it hard to get into teaching by virtue of the requirements for certification but then makes it easy to stay in teaching regardless of effectiveness in the classroom.



This policy perspective was exactly the subject of the state court case of *Vergara v. California*. That complaint asserted that laws of the state meant that some students received grossly ineffective teachers. (Sisters Beatriz and Elizabeth Vergara were [two of nine student plaintiffs](#) suing the case's defendants—the state, the California Teachers Association, and the California Federation of Teachers—on their constitutional right to a quality education.)

The legal challenge emphasized the tenure law—which means that teachers must be evaluated for tenure after just eighteen months; the dismissal statutes that make it difficult and expensive to dismiss a tenured teacher if it is ascertained that the teacher is ineffective; and the LIFO statute (Last In, First Out), which means effectiveness cannot be used as a criteria in dismissing teachers if a reduction in force is required.

In other words, the argument was that the statutes made it impossible to implement a system that made it possible to weed out an ineffective teacher from the classroom, thus subjecting some students to bad outcomes.

A California Superior Court ruled in 2014 that all of these [statutes were unconstitutional](#). The ruling found that, “There is also no dispute that there are a significant number of grossly ineffective teachers currently active in California classrooms.” But in 2016 the California Court of Appeals [reversed the decision](#), declaring it legally flawed. Then later in 2016 the California Supreme Court declined to review the appellate court decision, ending the case and leaving the existing statutes in place, in effect, [giving teachers unions a victory](#).

In 2017, California doesn't face the same judicial pressure as it did when *Vergara* was working its way through the courts. But the problem remains. The state's educational performance is near the bottom of the nation. Yet California's State Legislature finds it difficult to make the evaluation and dismissal of ineffective teachers something that can readily be done.

In July, state lawmakers [shelved a measure](#) that would have added another year of probation (and an individual improvement plan) to teacher tenure rules and oversight. Meanwhile, the legislature debated [a host of teacher-related incentives](#) including granting a tax credit for new teachers and taxable income for teachers with six to ten years of service, as well as allowing “urgent state of need” districts to hire teachers without a credential or permit.

Unfortunately, the view from the state capital doesn't reflect what's on kids' report cards: based on what's reflected in student outcomes, California's teachers policies remain [among the worst](#) in the nation.

Unless this changes, the future of California is seriously in doubt. America's nation-state, blessed with an economy global in scale, is not meeting national achievement standards, let alone world standards. This jeopardizes the economic future of both California and the nation—ultimately we all fail.

Eric Hanushek, the Hoover Institution's Paul and Jean Hanna Senior Fellow and a member of the Koret Task Force on K–12 Education, has pioneered the economic impact of teacher quality, high-stakes accountability, and class-size reduction.



## CALNOTES:



### VERGARA—THE SEQUEL?

*California's Vergara lawsuit, which earlier this decade threatened to topple the Golden State's teachers' tenure, seniority, and dismissal policies, ultimately fell short. Still, the cause endures, albeit, in other states. In late June, the Minnesota Court of Appeals heard oral arguments on a parent-led challenge to the state's teacher tenure laws (tenure's available after three years in Minnesota, versus only two in California). It's not the only judicial matter in that state that has national ramifications. This fall, the Minnesota Supreme Court is expected to hear a case, brought by Twin Cities parents, alleging that segregation along racial and economic lines has denied poor and minority children an adequate education.*

### COURTING REFORM ANOTHER WAY

*Teacher tenure leads to the question of teachers unions' political muscle, which in California leads to the “paycheck protection” movement: legally trying to prevent Democratic-friendly unions from political spending with money raised by automatic payroll deductions. The biggest threat to such union financial muscle, Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association (it sought an end of dues for politics), was rejected last year by a pre-Gorsuch Supreme Court that was one shy of a right-leaning majority. Look for another legal challenge, especially since the more populist approach hasn't panned out: three times in the past fifteen years, California ballot measures tried to curb union influence. Each and every time the unions prevailed.*

## California's History Curriculum— Objectionable, Not Objective

By Bill Evers

By law, textbooks and other teaching materials in California's public schools are supposed to be up-to-date. Yet history textbooks that are currently in the schools are twelve years old.

Why is this?

A somewhat simplified answer is that the California legislature has avoided passing a statute that would authorize a new set of curriculum-content standards for history and social science.

Informed speculation suggests there has been no statute because there is no influential constituent for teaching history that is accurate and objective. For example, Hollywood is a big-donor constituency in the Democratic Party, which controls California's State Legislature. Hence, we do have current content standards for the performing arts. But historians are not seen as the same sort of valuable constituency. Maybe, also, the legislators wanted to avoid getting drawn into curriculum wars over subject matter content in history.

Without the necessary legislation, Tom Torlakson, California's state superintendent of public instruction, got creative. He channeled his inner Barack Obama and decided to use his pen and his phone. This is to say that he decided to create during 2015–16 a new curriculum framework and to use it in place of the legally still-in-effect 1998 content standards for history.

The [new framework](#) was adopted by the State Board of Education in July 2016. It doesn't just provide guidance to teachers and publishers on supposedly effective teaching practices, as a curriculum framework is expected to do. It instead goes outside the statutes for K–12 public education. It does so by also listing what is by law supposed to be found in the state curriculum-content standards, namely, the topics that are to be covered in each grade. By going outside the law, the California Department of Education is inviting a legal challenge.

California law says that state-adopted textbooks are supposed to be aligned with the content standards that are in effect. Instead the state-level history textbook-adoption process that went on in late July 2017 was governed by the new curriculum framework. Publishers sought to align their products with the framework. If the state judged that the publishers had done so, the state adopted them. A school district that uses state-adopted textbooks and



other teaching materials is safe from being challenged about having up-to-date textbooks.

Nonetheless the 2016 framework contains egregious errors and has gaps in coverage. Moreover, it is filled with trendy ideological propaganda. "Curriculum frameworks are supposed to be aligned with the content standards," says Janet Nicholas, who was a member of the State Board of Education when the [1998 curriculum-content standards for history](#) were adopted. "This new history framework strays far from the letter and the spirit of the standards. Furthermore," Nicholas adds, "it is burdened with political correctness, identity politics, and unscientific economics that do a disservice to both students and teachers."

Was [Thomas Hobbes](#) a "civic reformer"? No, the authoritarian political thinker and tutor for Britain's absolute monarch Charles II was anything but. Hobbes is famous for telling us we must surrender almost all our rights to the ruler to prevent "a war of all against all."

Yet California's 2016 framework tells teachers and textbook writers that Hobbes was a mere civic reformer. Another supposed mere reformer, according to the framework, is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in actuality inspired the Jacobin totalitarianism of the French Revolution.

Let's look at supposed facts. Why is Olaudah Equiano listed in the framework as the author of an exemplary slavery narrative, when research has shown that Equiano [was born in America](#), not Africa, and that much of his narrative is false?

The history curriculum framework describes the Russian Revolution of 1917 as if the Communists overthrew the





inaccurately describes capitalism as inherently imperialist and colonialist.

Indeed, the history curriculum framework also teaches that “a purer form of communism” could also be “a less repressive form of communism.”

Why are students to be taught as fact the Marxist theory of “informal empire,” which says that free trade without conquest is basically the same as empire based on conquest? Why do whole sections of the framework read as if they are pamphlets written by antiglobalization street protesters carrying giant papier-mâché heads?

At times, the framework gives privileged status to globalization critics, with all their talk of class conflict, exploitation, the power of multinational corporations, “proliferating slums,” “McDonaldization” of the world, creating homogenized cultural experiences, promoting “an Americanizing consumer culture,” and “displacing local cultures with a single homogenizing global fashion.” This is not just tendentious ideological propaganda but indigestible jargon as well.

“California’s history and social science curriculum framework is dangerously one-sided, biased and incomplete,” says Lance Izumi, a fellow at the Pacific Research Institute and past president of the state’s community-college board.

“Crucial facts such as the massive death toll of Communism in the twentieth century are omitted, while a left-leaning narrative is evident throughout,” Izumi points out. “Under this curriculum framework, California’s students will be misinformed and under-informed and will not be adequately prepared to make knowledgeable judgments in our complex world.”

After textbooks have been nominated by the instructional-materials review panels in July, they then go to the state instructional-quality commission in September and—for final statewide adoption—to the State Board of Education in November. Parents, teachers, and community members can raise objections at those meetings. At this point in the process, the ideological lobbyists who have gotten their way usually relax.

History textbooks then are adopted by local districts. If the local district doesn’t choose state-adopted textbooks, the California Department of Education would want the district to be able to show that it reviewed the chosen textbooks to ensure that they are aligned with the 2016 framework. Again people can object about the chosen materials. But usually the public outcry about textbooks

doesn’t come until students bring them home and parents see them, probably in 2018.

The publishers have their hundreds of millions from textbook sales, and the ideological lobbyists are confident that they are shaping the minds of the upcoming generation.

Still to come in California is a model curriculum for ethnic studies. Last year, many Republicans in the State Legislature voted against [AB 216](#), sponsored by Democratic assemblyman Luis A. Alejo, who himself has an elite education (a bachelor’s degrees from UC Berkeley, a master’s in education from Harvard, a law degree from UC Davis. Alejo’s bill mandated the creation of an ethnic-studies model and would encourage K–12 ethnic studies across the state.

In contrast, Republican assemblyman Rocky Chávez—in his youth, he picked grapes, worked in a packing plant, and gathered almonds—voted against laws promoting ethnic studies, saying the state government should put an emphasis on helping minority students by aiding their progress in mathematics and science subjects.

Ethnic-studies laws have “the potential to hurt children,” says Chávez, himself a former charter-school principal. “The only way to make sure our children are successful in a world economy is to stress math and science.”

Student achievement in California remains abysmally low (the lowest in the country for low-income children), but political interference in the curriculum is still a favorite activity of progressive legislators and interest groups.

Bill Evers is a research fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution and was an assistant US secretary of education for planning, evaluation, and policy development, 2007–9. This article is an updated revision of an article that appeared on April 8, 2016, in the *Orange County Register*.





## CALNOTES:



### E PLURIBUS . . . UNINFORMED

The first line in Sam Cooke's "What a Wonderful World"—"don't know much about history"—rings true. According to the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), only 18 percent of 1,100 liberal arts colleges and universities require undergraduate students to take a course in American history or government. An August 2015 ACTA poll found only 20 percent of Americans able to identify James Madison as the Constitution's author. The same survey also found that 60 percent of collegians couldn't name a requirement for ratifying a constitutional amendment. Not that this ignorance is an overnight development: a 2012 ACTA survey found only 20 percent of college students were aware of the Emancipation Proclamation's effect; less than half knew that George Washington was the victor at Yorktown.

### ETHAN ALLEN WOULD APPROVE

New Hampshire, home to the nation's first presidential primary, is also a leader in closing America's historical knowledge gap. The New Hampshire Historical Society has launched a \$1.2 million "democracy project" with three stated purposes: content and curriculum development (the state's history curriculum hasn't been updated since the 1990s); teacher training; and advocating for more social studies and civics instruction at the state and local levels. Is New Hampshire on the right path to rediscovering its past? Last year the Granite State Legislature passed a law requiring students to pass a civics test for high school graduation; this year, they added a civics instruction requirement.

## The New Pro-Charter LA School Board Means a Chance to Treat Students as Individuals, not Assembly-Line Products

By Caprice Young

The fundamental obstacle to meaningful change for the students in the Los Angeles region can best be summed up by a statement we hear all the time from former students: "I am a proud product of LAUSD."

The system has unfortunately trained its students to see themselves as widgets. So I was encouraged to see the voters in the Los Angeles Unified School District's second, fourth, and sixth districts earlier this year [elect a trio of candidates](#) who are eager to make the school district more human.

In her swearing-in ceremony, [Kelly Gonez](#) talked about the students she encountered every day at the elementary and middle schools where she taught. She spoke of "the loads they carry": the burdens weighing on the shoulders of so many children. Some arrive at school hungry; some didn't have a place to sleep the night before; others suffer harassment and prejudice. She made them human. She challenged everyone to define each child not as a product of a system but as an individual with distinctive needs and abilities.

Gonez captured the nurturing spirit that drives so many educators to work tirelessly to help their kids shine; if only the bureaucracy had the same goals and motivation.

[Nick Melvoin](#), also a thirty-something former teacher and a newcomer to the board, has long fought to remove the system's obstacles. He participated in [a lawsuit](#) that successfully convinced the district to stop replacing lower-seniority qualified teachers with unqualified staff during budget cuts. After one of his former students swore him in, Melvoin vowed to keep pushing to shift labor agreements and operating policies to be more student centered.

Together with newly reelected board member [Monica Garcia](#) and new board president [Ref Rodriguez](#), Gonez and Melvoin are uniquely positioned to steer LAUSD away from its production line mentality.

But it won't be easy.

The industrial mind-set is deeply embedded in the culture of the district's machinery. Even the most revolutionary board members have not changed that. I see it in students who call themselves a "proud product," which implies they've been shaped by a system that creates "well-rounded" widgets, devoid of individuality. I saw it firsthand when I served on the board from 1999 to 2003, including two years as president.

For example, our board passed a resolution that let schools choose which reading program to use, but the bureaucrats removed that flexibility when they implemented it. Many of them micromanaged each school's use of the programs, erasing the creativity and wisdom of experienced teachers. That's the product mentality at work.

The product mentality leads district staff to resist heightened expectations for academic performance because it conflicts with their learned powerlessness in the face of overwhelming social ills. It deters teachers from testing low-income students to find out if they're gifted and, therefore, eligible for more-innovative educational support. It pushes educators to "teach to the middle" rather than tailor lesson plans to individual students. It makes chronic academic failure or absenteeism the fault of the child. It also creates the phenomenon that I call "[malicious compliance](#)," meaning following the



rules in a way that is intended to result in failure. In other words, “We’ll comply, but we’ll do it based on the letter rather than the intention of the policy.”

For example, twelve years ago, the school board passed a bold resolution insisting that every student take the high school courses necessary to qualify for admission to the University of California system. [The mandatory fifteen-course sequence](#) became known as “A-G.” Since then, district staffers have complied with the directive: meticulously and maliciously.

As students entered high school, staff did a pretty solid job of making sure they enrolled in A-G courses. [But they knew what would happen:](#) about half the kids would fail the A-G courses. That’s exactly what did happen, allowing administrators to throw up their hands and blame the board for passing misguided resolutions, instead of simply letting staff do their jobs.

*Meaningful* compliance would have looked very different. Actual leaders would have looked at the whole system, beginning in early childhood education and kindergarten, and asked, How can we make sure students are prepared to excel in their A-G courses by the time they reach high school? How can we make sure every graduate is college and career ready? They would have worked to fulfill the spirit, rather than the letter, of the board’s resolution. Instead staffers took the easy way out and said, “I told you so.” Even the best policies cannot produce wise practices in an inhuman system.

Pockets of brilliant innovation exist within LAUSD, thanks to deeply committed professionals struggling up the down escalator. But they often get slammed down like whack-a-mole for exposing the other mediocre pieces of the system.

When you talk to the people who’ve created these bright spots, they shy away. They try to keep their work a secret. Unfortunately, they live in fear that the district might swoop in and “help them to death” or impose some kind of point-less regulation or even force them to stop what they’re doing altogether. Innovators hide or leave; cynical staffers prefer to remain cogs in the machine.

Not surprisingly, the district’s tendency to treat staff as replaceable parts and students as products is precisely what has pushed so many parents to seek out other options, such as [charter schools](#).

At most charters individuality and student empowerment are the goals that underlie [academic success](#). From the charter perspective, making an exception doesn’t mean disrupting a fragile and complex system, it means remaining flexible to address the distinct challenges facing every child and build on their unique strengths. Fair doesn’t mean the same treatment; fair means equitable outcomes.

The members of the new reform majority on the school board share a fundamental support for charters because charters intentionally design student-centered environments. Instead of suffocating charters with burdensome bureaucracy and petty political red tape, I believe this board will lean toward promoting thoughtful collaboration, meaningful accountability, and long-term agreements, so charter leaders can spend more time developing educational programs in which children are treated as individuals, not as assembly-line products.

Beyond being narrowly pro-charter, this board is likely to end the “us versus them” disinction. The new majority is poised to elevate internal excellence, backing more of what works in magnets, pilots, and niche programs in otherwise traditional schools. These internal entrepreneurs need board champions to defend their dreams and expand or multiply successes.

It takes courage to break away from the trudge toward the mediocrity of the product-making machine. I believe this board will do more of what works and less of what doesn’t; in the process, they will put kids first.

Caprice Young, Ed.D, is the CEO of Magnolia Public Schools. A former president of the LAUSD Board of Education, she also co-founded the California Charter Schools Association.







## CALNOTES:

### THE LOS ANGELES UNITED NATIONS



The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is an educational colossus: 451 elementary schools, 179 middle and senior high schools, 169 charter schools; in all, 1,302 learning facilities. Another way to read the LAUSD: as a Southern California United Nations. Ninety-four languages other than English are spoken at LA Unified schools. The district has more than 141,000 students who are learning to speak English proficiently. Their primary languages are Spanish (92.5 percent of English learners); Armenian (1.1 percent); Korean (1 percent); Tagalog, Cantonese, Arabic, Vietnamese, and Russian each less than 1 percent. With a total enrollment of nearly 735,000 students (107,000 of those in charter schools), the LAUSD is the equivalent of America's eighteenth-largest city or the combined populations of Honolulu, Hawaii, and Tampa, Florida.

### THE BUDDE SYSTEM

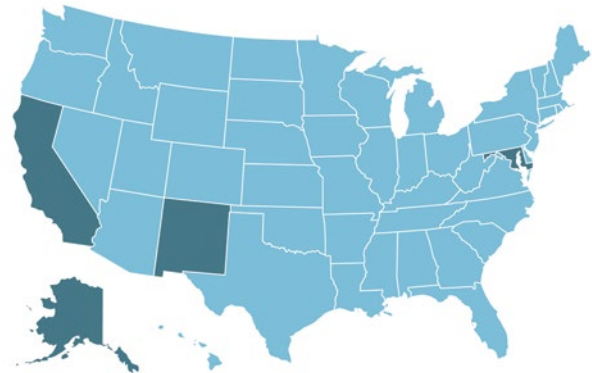
Fast food has Ray Kroc. The charter school movement has the late Ray Budde. In 1974, the former University of Massachusetts at Amherst education professor authored a "Education by Charter," which called on educators to "remove power from most central office positions and direct funds directly to schools." Fast-forward to 1988 and Albert Shanker, at the time the president of the American Federation of Teachers, proposing a new kind of public school—a charter school—enabling teachers to be more innovative in their instruction. Only 5 percent of current US public school enrollment is in charter schools. Geographically, more than half of all charter schools (56.5) are in cities; 37 percent are in the western United States; only 10 percent are in rural areas (compared to 29 percent of public, non-charter schools).

## Blame California's Elected Leaders, not Its Teachers, for What Ails the State's Public Schools

By Marshall Tuck

As summer comes to an end, 6.2 million children will return to public schools in California. Three million of them can't read or write at grade level (the number is [especially tragic](#) among male African American kids). In reading, California fourth-graders rank among the lowest: forty-eighth in the nation. This isn't a recent development: twenty-five years ago, we ranked forty-ninth.

## States With The Lowest Reading Ranking



47<sup>th</sup> - Alaska      49<sup>th</sup> - District of Columbia  
48<sup>th</sup> - California      50<sup>th</sup> - New Mexico

Source: [The Nation's Report Card](#)

FACTS ON THE ISSUE ☒

Think about that.

As Californians, we're in the most competitive economy in the history of mankind. Low-skill jobs pay poverty wages. Yet 3 million kids can't read and write at grade level.

This isn't just a policy failure. It's a moral stain on the State of California. That's why I've dedicated [the last fifteen years of my life](#) to public education and have helped open public charter schools and turned around district schools in some of California's poorest communities.

For more than a generation, our elected officials have failed California's kids. While politicians try to blame Washington, the truth is that Sacramento is the real obstacle to success. Almost all of the funding and rules that govern our public schools come from the state's capital.

Politicians have done little to address our unprecedented teacher shortage. They allowed the state teacher pension to balloon to [a \\$100 billion unfunded liability](#) and let the state fall from seventh in per pupil funding down to forty-first. They suffocate innovation and local control with [a 2,500-page Education Code](#).

As the world has changed, our schools remain stuck in the past. Our student population has grown far more diverse, and our economy is more knowledge based than ever, but too many schools operate largely as they did forty years ago. They're preparing students for the twentieth century, leaving them unprepared to meet the demands of the twenty-first.

We hear a lot of people blame educators for the conditions of our schools, but that's wrong. The fault lies with our elected



officials, and it's time we get some new ones. It should begin with California's top education official: the state superintendent of public instruction.

There are no silver bullets. We need a ten-year plan to improve our public schools using four pillars for proven success:

**Great teachers and principals.** To have the best public schools in the country, we need the best educators. That starts by modernizing teacher and principal training in our universities. When teachers get into their classrooms, they need mentors and ambitious principals so they can continue to grow. Although I believe the issue gets overblown by the media, we need to change the state's inflexible work laws around areas like seniority-based layoffs and tenure to ensure accountability and flexibility for local schools. Finally let's be clear: we must pay our teachers more. If we truly respect the teaching profession, it's time to show it with competitive wages.

**Twenty-first-century schools.** I believe in local control, not top-down bureaucracy. With more flexibility and support, schools can be places all kids are excited to attend and that prepare them for the twenty-first century.

Our schools should begin with prekindergarten, teach foreign languages in elementary school, integrate arts, and offer courses, such as computer science, that prepare students to be successful in the new economy. To prepare students, we must teach problem solving, not rote memorization. We should use new technology to help educators do even more and to help bring curriculum to life. Learning must extend beyond the walls of a classroom; we should partner with

businesses, nonprofits, and other organizations to give students hands-on learning experiences.

**All children.** Our students are incredibly diverse, and the demands of the twenty-first-century economy—and morality—require that we educate all of them well. Whether you're in special education or an English learner—regardless of who you are and how you learn—our public schools should serve you. We have to do a lot more to ensure our children living in poverty have access to quality schools. For too long we have not effectively educated our most vulnerable students.

**The California Department of Education (CDE)** must act as a catalyst of innovation, then lead collaborations that spread great ideas and practices across schools in California. Wherever great things are happening—whether in district schools or charter schools—we must learn from them. The state must intervene when schools are chronically failing our kids. We can't sit by while year after year entire communities are left behind.

**Fair funding.** Money alone won't solve our problems; we must not throw good money after bad. But the fact is that California schools rank forty-first in [per-pupil funding](#), and we must change that. First we need more budget transparency. Every taxpayer has a right to see how their tax dollars are spent, and we must cut the state bureaucracy to get more funds into local classrooms. We must regain public trust and then ask for the investments we need to fund our schools.

California once had the best schools in the country. We can again. No more settling for mediocrity or failure; no more politics as usual. Let's work together to demand better and finally give California's students the education they deserve.

Marshall Tuck was the President of the Green Dot Public Schools, founding CEO of the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, and Educator-in-Residence at the New Teacher Center. He is a candidate for State Superintendent of Public Instruction in 2018.





## CALNOTES:

### SACRAMENTO SCHOOLHOUSE ROCK



California is one of only thirteen states that elect a superintendent of public instruction to oversee its public schools. Unlike many other states, there's no requirement of an advanced degree or an active teaching certificate. The job's nonpartisan but only nominally so (Delaine Eastin, who held the post from 1995 to 2003, is currently a Democratic candidate for governor). What California has created is a bureaucratic romper room. There's no longer a gubernatorial education secretary, but there's still a nonelected State Board of Education, plus numerous nonelected commissions mucking around in school-related matters—and that's not counting 120 state legislators who consider themselves education savants

## CALNOTES:

### CALIFORNIA'S SWETT EQUITY



The architect of California public education was John Swett, the Golden State's school superintendent in the midst of the American Civil War. Just thirty-three at the time of his election, Swett convinced lawmakers to create a state board of education, organize schools into grades, and provide for teacher certification. He also secured the abolition of rate bills charging parents for tuition, lengthened the school year, and secured pay increases for teachers. The legendary Swett, however, would have issues with this generation of school reformers: "The child should be taught to consider his instructor . . . superior to the parent in point of authority," Swett once remarked. "The vulgar impression that parents have a legal right to dictate to teachers is entirely erroneous. . . . Parents have no remedy as against the teacher." And you wonder why school choice has struggled in California.

## EUREKA

### ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

*Eureka* was created to serve as an occasional discussion of the policy, political, and economic issues confronting California. Like the Golden State motto from which this forum's title was borrowed, the goal here is one of discovery—identifying underlying problems and offering reasonable and common-sense reforms for America's great nation-state.

Ever since Archimedes supposedly first uttered the word, *eureka* has meant joy, satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment. Drawing on the combined wisdom of Hoover's policy experts and leading California thinkers, we hope that you'll find enlightenment in these pages. Hoover research fellow Bill Whalen, who has nearly two decades of experience in California politics and public policy, serves as this forum's editor.

For additional information and previous issues, visit [www.hoover.org/eureka](http://www.hoover.org/eureka).

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# EUREKA

CALIFORNIA'S POLICY, ECONOMICS, AND POLITICS

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