

# State Schools Ranked Low, But Getting Better

Planned reforms earn high marks in national study

By Nanette Asimov  
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A new state-by-state ranking of education quality shows that California has nowhere to go but up — and that it may be heading in that direction.

The study, by the respected newspaper Education Week, ranks every state in key areas such as resources. It highlights reading and math skills, and looks closely at what each state is doing to improve academic performance.

Although California's public schools ranked poorly in the study, the researchers noted that a number of reforms in place are widely expected to bear fruit in the next few years.

Higher academic standards, new achievement tests, financial rewards for raising scores and incentives for teachers to improve their own skills are typical of the kinds of changes happening in California and around the country.

"(California) has devised a whole set of reporting and financial incentives that has really gotten people's attention in schools and is causing behavioral change," Stanford University education professor Mike Kirst told Education Week.

But Kirst also criticized the state for rushing to use a new achievement test a few years ago, instead of waiting to develop one that would test students on California's new, rigorous academic standards. Exam questions that reflect the academic standards are slowly being introduced into the existing test, called the Stanford 9.

The problem of mismatched standards and tests exists in many states, the study shows, raising concerns that teachers will ignore the higher standards in favor of teaching to the test.

California earned a B grade from Education Week for the quality of its "standards and accountability" reforms. Six states earned an F, and 13 others earned a D-minus to a D-plus, suggesting that many still have a long way to go.

"Standards must be rigorous and aligned to curricula and assessments," said Sandra Feldman, president of the American Federation of Teachers. "This solid formula is working in many school districts, and is overdue in others."

Every state now requires an exam, the study shows, which was not true as recently as four years ago when California was among the states that did not test. But the quali-

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## Education Board OKs Tougher Math Books

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SACRAMENTO

The state Board of Education approved back-to-basics math textbooks yesterday that fully meet California's tough 1997 standards that call for algebra in eighth grade.

By an 11-to-0 vote, the board authorized a dozen math textbook programs offered by nine publishers for elementary and middle-school students.

The board also rejected 11 programs by seven publishers as not meeting the standards that outline in detail what students should learn in each grade.

Dozens of teachers and school officials and state Superintendent Delaine Eastin asked in vain for the board to approve a set of books for kindergarten-through-third grades by Everyday Learning.

However, the board did allow districts that are currently using Everyday Learning's books and can show "exemplary achievement" by students on the statewide test to apply for a waiver to use state funds to buy the books.

In approving the textbooks, the board accepted the recommendation of its Curriculum Commission, the final of four committees that spent 18 months intensively reviewing the books.

In most cases, all four of the committees agreed on the books. However, for a few submissions, the Curriculum Commission and the board reversed recommendations made by panels of math scholars, teachers and parents.

For example, the commission recommended books for kindergarten-through-sixth grade by Saxon Publishers Inc., even though previous panels said they did not meet the standards. Saxon textbooks are popular among back-to-basics schools.

The opposite occurred for Everyday Learning's books, which were developed by University of Chicago mathematics professors. The K-3 books were recommended by the first two panels, but rejected by the Curriculum Commission.

Susan Stickel, an assistant super-

### Looks at Books

Here are details of California's school book program:

■ **What** The state periodically adopts lists of recommended textbooks for major subjects for kindergarten through eighth grade. Districts that use certain state funds must buy their books from those lists, which remain good for six years.

■ **Why:** The mathematics books approved yesterday are supposed to meet the tough 1997 state standards, which outline what students should learn in each grade.

■ **How much** The 2000-2001 state budget contains \$595 million for textbooks in all subjects; \$342 million of that must be spent on books from state-approved lists.

■ **History:** The board approved a limited interim list of math and English books in 1999 that could be purchased with a new state program providing \$250 million a year for books linked to the standards. Before that, the last major math textbook adoption was in 1994. The 1994 textbooks were linked to the state's 1992 framework, which emphasized group discussions, calculators and guessing and de-emphasized basic skills and direct instruction. Critics called that "fuzzy math."

Associated Press

intendent in Elk Grove and the commission's math chairwoman, said the commission decided Everyday's books did not meet the standards and were difficult for teachers who were not math majors to teach.

Stanford University math professor Jim Milgram said Everyday's program "would be a disaster" when used by teachers who don't have math knowledge equivalent to a third-year math major in college.

Teachers and officials from dozens of districts that have been using Everyday for several years disagreed and said their test scores had risen with the books.

Ruth Cossey, a math education professor at Mills College, said the arguments against Everyday wrongly imply that teachers of minority and poor students are not capable of teaching rigorous material.

## State Schools Ranked Low, But Reforms Get High Marks

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ty of those tests has raised concerns. "States often claim their tests are linked to their standards, but research suggests that alignment is not as close as it should be," writes Ulrich Boser, an author of the study.

But California's overall scorecard would make any parent grimace. Here are some results:

■ Only one in five fourth- and eighth-graders reads proficiently, according to the National Assessment

of Educational Progress.

■ Only one in six eighth-graders is proficient in math, dropping to one in nine fourth-graders.

■ C-minus for improving teacher quality.

■ D-minus for adequacy of resources.

■ C-plus for equity of resources.

The study notes that California has recently put up \$914 million in rewards for improving test scores.

California's school reform system is "the largest and most aggressive package of teacher incentives ever

offered by any state in America," Gov. Gray Davis told Education Week.

Here are some of the study's findings about other states:

■ Indiana, West Virginia and Wisconsin earned an A for adequate resources.

■ Alaska and Arizona earned an F for adequate resources.

■ Connecticut has the best readers, with 46 percent of fourth-graders reading proficiently, and 42 percent of eighth-graders at that level.

■ No state earned an A for im-

proving teacher quality. North Carolina did best, winning a B+.

■ Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming earned an F for improving teacher quality.

■ Only Maryland and New York earned an A for standards and accountability.

■ Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Rhode Island and Tennessee earned an F for standards and accountability.

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