

Failing Our Future: The Holes in California's School Accountability System and How to Fix Them

By

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Research shows that state school accountability systems have a positive impact on student achievement, but only when states accurately track schools' academic performance and attach interventions or rewards to the performance or non-performance of schools. California's school accountability system, the Academic Performance Index (API), is unfortunately severely deficient in this crucial area of identifying what's working or not working in schools.

Failing Our Future: The Holes in California's School Accountability System and How to Fix Them co-authored by James S. Lanich, Lance T. Izumi, and Xiaochin C. Yan, reveals the shortcomings of California's current school accountability system in contrast to the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The study also profiles two exceptional California schools, the C.A. Jacobs Intermediate School in Dixon and Laton High School in Laton. Both have strong accountability systems and are on track to meet grade-level proficiency goals for all students. Finally, the study gives important recommendations to reform the current system.

What's Wrong with California's Accountability System?

- The state's Academic Performance Index (API), which measures the academic performance and test-score-based growth of individual schools, establishes the performance target for all schools at 800 (on a scale of 200 to 1,000). But the target goal is significantly lower than grade-level proficiency, which is 875.
- Schools scoring below 800 are given annual growth targets based on a minimal five percent of the difference between the school's current API score and the goal of 800. Using this formula, it would take a school with a starting API of 735 (4,900 California schools have this API or lower) about 44 years to reach 800. In other words, generations of California kids attending these schools will receive an education far below an expectation of reaching grade level.
- Two school improvement programs under the state's accountability system are the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II-USP) and the High Priority Schools Grant Program (HPSGP). Review of student test scores at schools participating in these programs shows no significant differences in academic achievement, as measured by improvement in grade-level proficiency on the California Standards Test (CST) over time, yet collectively these programs have spent more than \$1 billion. Despite this lack of significant academic improvement, many schools met the criteria established by the state for successful implementation with sufficient API gains for successfully exiting the program.
- The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires that not only a certain percentage of all students at a school hit grade-level proficiency in reading every year, but also that significant racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other subgroups of students hit those proficiency targets as well. Since California's API measure focuses on collective schoolwide performance and growth, there is no incentive to intervene with lower-performing students as long as enough higher-performing students keep the school's average scores above the API benchmarks. Schoolwide API fails to detect or address stagnant or falling student minority subgroup performance.

The following recommendations will help reform California's accountability structures:

1. *Set Expectations High*

We know from high-performing environments across the country that the most important strategy education leaders can implement will not cost them a penny or require legislation or countless committee meetings. It simply requires a will to set academic achievement expectations high and accept no excuses for not meeting them.

2. *Abandon the Complicated API*

California cannot continue to cling to the API because it is what has been in place. It often falsely shows that schools are doing better than they actually are when compared with grade-level proficiency expectations. Moreover, schools recognized as having achieved "tremendous" growth on the schoolwide API often mask the poor performance of minority children.

3. *Keep it Simple*

Focus on grade-level proficiency as measured by the California Standards Test. By keeping the focus on grade-level proficiency, greater public understanding about what is actually happening in the schools over time can be achieved. Furthermore, it will more easily allow the identification of those schools and students that need additional help in meeting the content standards and ensure that resources are effectively allocated to leverage the best possible results.

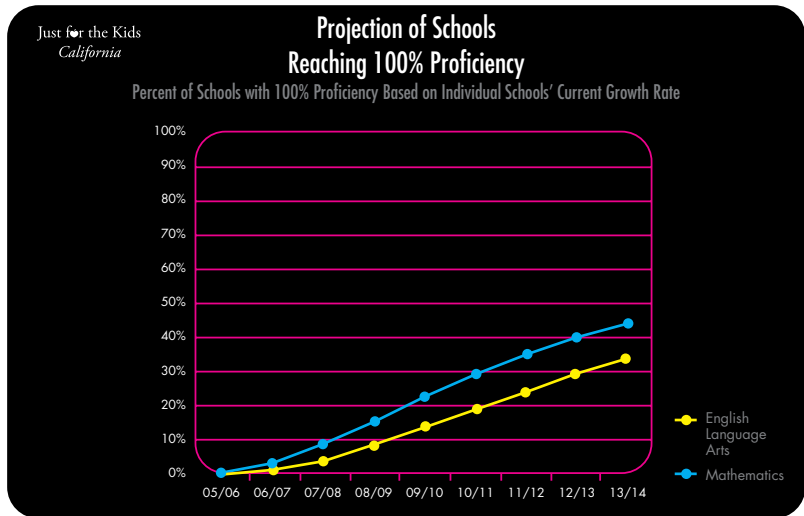
4. *Program Improvement Means "In Need of Improvement"*

Too many California officials are afraid of having too many schools in NCLB's Program Improvement category. Rather than worrying about the numbers, these officials need to acknowledge that thousands of schools in the state are indeed in need of improvement and that the students in these schools will suffer if officials continue to game the system in order to prevent the schools from becoming subject to reforming sanctions and interventions.

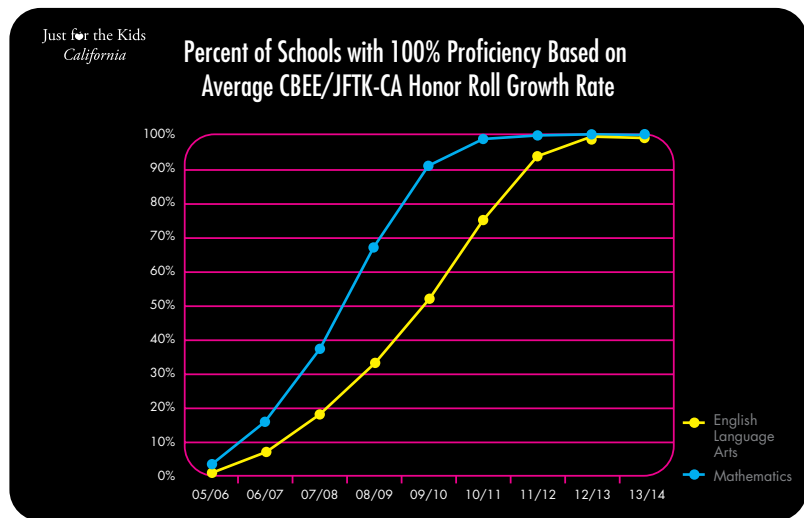
5. *Replication of Best Practices from High-Performing Schools*

High-performing schools with high percentages of low-income and minority populations need to be recognized and treated as models to be replicated, rather than as statistical anomalies to be explained away as outliers or as breaking the mold. An intensive effort must be undertaken to find out exactly what these schools are doing to get the academic results and to transfer this knowledge to the low-performing or average performing schools so that improvement can be scaled up.

California deserves to have an accountability system that matches our world-class standards. If the public trust is to be regained, an education accountability system that is clear and understandable to all must be constructed. When schools, parents, and the public do not have an understanding of how the accountability system works, they will ultimately have no faith in the system or the data that it presents.



The percentage of schools reaching 100 percent proficiency by 2014 if they match the average growth of the highly improving schools, designated Honor Roll schools, by the California Business for Educational Excellence (CBEE).

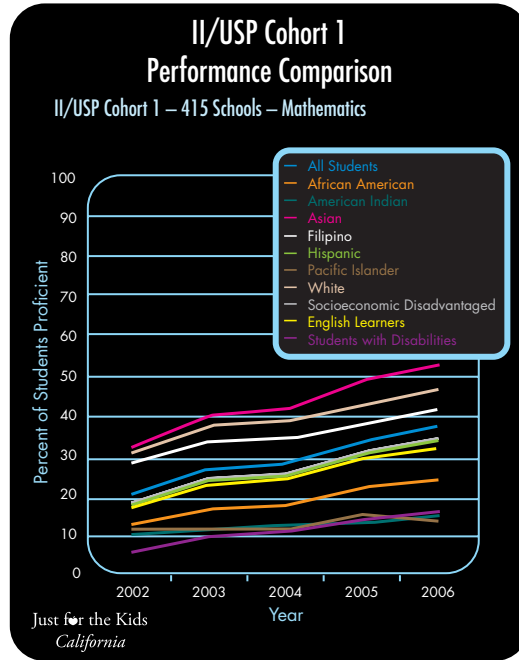
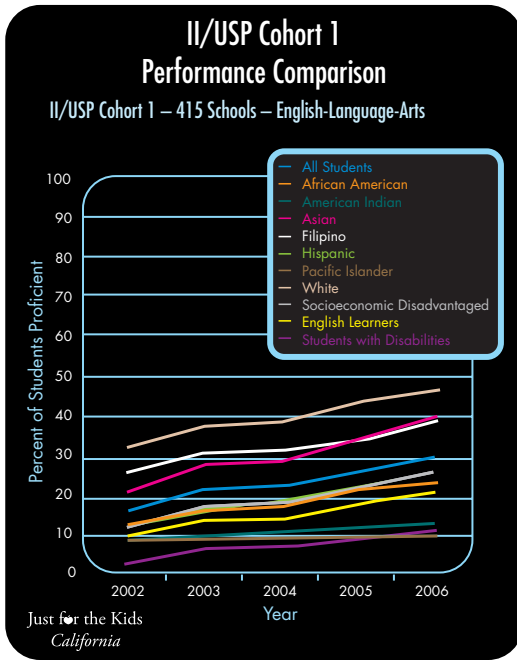


The percentage of schools reaching 100 percent proficiency based on the average rate of growth from 2004 to 2005 of the Honor Roll schools on the California Standards Test. Clearly, the schools in the state should adopt the best practices of the Honor Roll schools to bring improvement to scale.

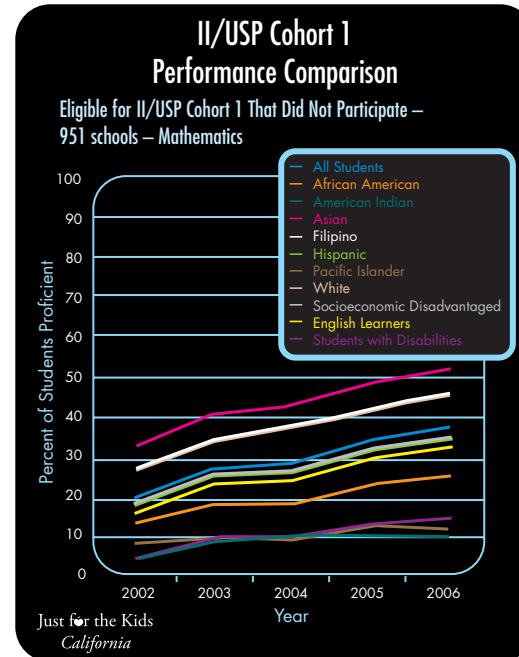
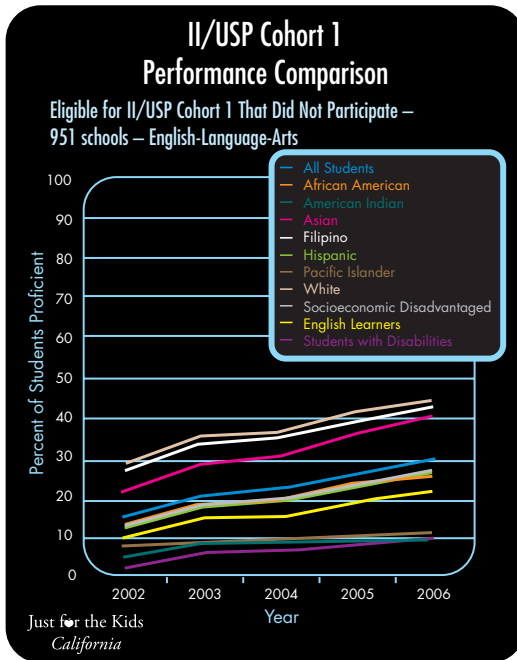
Starting API	Schools with that API or lower in 2005	Years allowed to reach 800
735	4,900	44
700	3,739	52
635	1,757	61
600	1,109	65
500	425	73
400	123	78
300	7	82
267	2	84

Using the state's growth targets, it would take a school with a starting API of 735 (4,900 California schools have this API or lower) 44 years to reach 800. It would take a school with a starting API of 635 about 61 years to reach California's performance standard. Moreover, some schools will graduate four generations of Californians without ever reaching the performance standard.

Improvement over time for all Cohort 1 II/USP-eligible schools that accepted grants



Improvement over time for all II/USP-eligible schools during the Cohort 1 startup year that did not accept the grants or state intervention



There are no differences in academic achievement for the participating schools, as measured by improvement in grade-level proficiency on the CST over time. Despite this lack of significant improvement, these schools met the criteria established by the state for successful implementation with sufficient achievement results for exiting the program.



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