

# Holding Schools Accountable



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By Dan Walters, October 9, 2019

Educational accountability is attracting a lot of political attention — or perhaps lip service — these days in California.

Gov. Gavin Newsom has signed two bills touted as bringing more accountability to education.

One, [Assembly Bill 1505](#), applies new controls on charter schools that receive public funds but are independently managed and largely exempt from the regulatory labyrinth Sacramento has imposed on traditional public schools. AB 1505 gives districts more authority to deny petitions for charters and imposes stricter standards for meeting educational goals.

Newsom also signed [Assembly Bill 1340](#), a crackdown on private, for-profit colleges and [trade schools](#) that, critics say, often offer poor educations but saddle students with large amounts of [debt](#).

AB 1340 will require the targeted institutions to disclose the employment outcomes of graduates, thereby allowing prospective students to make more informed decisions about their programs.

Charter schools should be held to strong performance standards, and for-profit schools offering post-high school, employment-oriented instruction should give students more insight into their job prospects.

However, shouldn't public K-12 schools and taxpayer-supported [colleges and universities](#) be treated equally?

Newsom's predecessor, Jerry Brown, persuaded the Legislature to base state support of community colleges, in part, on how well they prepare their students for employment or transfers into four-year colleges. However, Brown stoutly resisted any similarly strong accountability for K-12 schools, saying he trusted local school officials to do the right thing as he gave them extra money to improve outcomes for poor and English-learner students.

Education reform groups have been highly critical of school districts, particularly large ones such as Los Angeles Unified, for a lack of transparency

on how the extra money, provided through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), is being spent and what results have been.

The battles over LCFF have led the Legislature to direct State Auditor Elaine Howle to delve into how it is working in “three large, geographically dispersed districts” with substantial numbers of at-risk students, determining how the districts are spending the extra money and how they are measuring their progress.

Brown also resisted calls for a “longitudinal data system” that would [track](#) how individual students are performing from kindergarten through higher education and into the workplace, thereby revealing what’s working and what’s not.

Brown’s position reflected the education establishment’s fear that more data would translate into stricter accountability. Newsom, however, included \$10 million to [create](#) such a system in his first budget and work on it has begun.

Better tracking of how individual students are faring could, and perhaps should, morph into what’s called a “growth model” of accountability, replacing the state’s current “dashboard” system that uses a variety of measures, some nonacademic, and confines results to the school and district levels.

Morgan Polikoff, an associate professor of education policy at USC’s Rossier School of Education, advocates the individual student growth model in a [recent article](#) published by Policy Analysis for California Education, a research consortium sponsored by the state’s major universities.

Polikoff points out that California is one of just two states that lack such an accountability model now, and is critical of the state’s “dashboard” as “insufficient for the task of contributing to continuous improvement.”

“Forty-eight states have already done so; there is no reason for California to hang back with Kansas while other states use growth data to improve their schools,” Polikoff writes.

So will California get serious about holding public schools accountable for how well students learn?

If we’re willing to do so for for-profit schools, charter schools and community colleges, there’s no reason traditional K-12 schools should escape such scrutiny.