



CAPITAL IDEAS

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Not April Fool's Day: Newsom Gets Education Award as California Students Suffer and Fail

BY LANCE IZUMI

When Governor Gavin Newsom recently received a national award for education, just as student learning craters due to his disastrous school policies, one could hear California parents collectively exclaim, “Seriously?”

The Education Commission of the States, which is an interstate agency that is supposed to create opportunities for state policymakers to learn from each other, shockingly gave its innovation award to California, not because of its success in improving student outcomes, but for spending lots of taxpayer dollars.

ECS cited “an ongoing increase to the [state’s] school funding formula” to hire more school employees. California also funded an array of non-instructional programs “to convert thousands of schools into full-service community schools with wraparound supports.”

Further, ECS lauded California for pushing universal government preschool, despite research from Vanderbilt University showing that such programs fail to improve student achievement and may even be detrimental to children.

As a capper, ECS’s press release cited a nomination letter for California that claims, “there is no other state doing as much to advance educational equity for its neediest students.”

In education-speak, “equity” means guaranteeing that all students achieve the same results. And, yes, California has achieved a perverse equity—most of its students are failing.

Nowhere to be found in ECS’s gushing announcement of its award to California is any reference to the nearly uniform learning disaster taking place in the state’s classrooms.

For instance, an analysis of California’s 2021 state test scores found that the math knowledge of the average eighth grader was at the fifth-grade level.

For African-American, Latino, and low-income eighth graders, the news was even worse, with average scores at the fourth-grade level. So much for Newsom’s vaunted “equity” success.

David Wakelyn, former executive director for policy development at The College Board and the author of the test-score analysis, called California's student math scores "a five-alarm fire."

It is a fire that Newsom's education policies fueled.

"California was the worst state in the nation when it came to reopening schools," noted Corey DeAngelis, research director at the American Federation for Children.

Newsom, who had received the support of the powerful California Teachers Association in his 2018 gubernatorial election and in the 2021 recall election, hewed toward the unions, which pushed against quicker school reopenings supported by parents.

"These union-induced school closures hurt children academically, mentally, and physically," observed DeAngelis, and politicians like Newsom "backed by power-hungry teachers unions put the desires of adults over the needs of children."

Given the massive learning losses suffered by California students and Newsom's acquiescence to union interests over those of parents, it is not surprising that Californians have lost confidence in the state's public school system.

A February 2022 UC Berkeley poll found that only 35 percent of voters gave their local school district an A or B grade, which is a huge drop from the 55 percent who gave their districts high grades a decade ago.

Another poll in April found that among voters in 10 states, which included states such as Texas, Colorado, and Missouri, California voters were the least satisfied with their public schools.

California parents are so dissatisfied with the public schools that they are un-enrolling their children in droves.

In 2020, enrollment in the state's public schools fell by 160,000, according to a Los Angeles Times analysis. In 2021, enrollment dropped by another 110,000.

Many parents have decided to homeschool their children. According to the Coalition for Responsible Home Education, prior to the pandemic there were around 200,000 homeschoolers in the state. One media analysis estimates that in the 2020-21 school, there were 400,000 homeschoolers for at least part of the school year.

Importantly, while public-school students were experiencing massive learning losses, new research shows that in 2022 California homeschool students scored at the 78th to 88th percentile in reading, language, math, science, and social studies, which is 28 to 38 percentile points above the national average.

Gavin Newsom is like the Roman emperor Nero, who fiddled while Rome burned. In Newsom's case, he fiddles while the future of California's children burns to ashes.

Lance Izumi is senior director of the Center for Education at the Pacific Research Institute. He is the author of the book The Homeschool Boom: Pandemic, Policies, and Possibilities.

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