



# California Teachers Empowerment Network

*Standing out from the crowd, fully informed on the issues*

*Please note that in addition to the traditional emailing of the CTEN monthly newsletter, we will once again post it on the CTEN blog - <http://www.ctenteachers.blogspot.com/> As usual, there are several controversial issues covered in this letter and we urge you to share your opinions with other teachers.*

December 15, 2021

Dear Colleague,

The subject of standardized testing for students has become very controversial over the years, but with the Covid related shutdowns leading to varying degrees of learning loss, the debate has become even more heated. In *The 74*, Connor Williams posits, “Schools are More Likely to Do What’s Easiest for Them If No One’s Watching. Why Standardized Tests Are Critically Useful, Especially Now.”

*But, as anyone who’s ever groaned at their car’s “Check Engine” light or wondered if that mole on their elbow is growing knows, problems don’t evaporate just because we refuse to find out.*

*That’s why, [as the pandemic finally allows schools to get back to safe, universal, uninterrupted in-person instruction](#), it’s important that they administer the full battery of annual federally-mandated assessments. These tests make up a relatively small part of the assessment footprint in U.S. schools: annual math and English Language Arts tests in elementary and middle school (and once more in high school); one science test in elementary, middle, and high school; and annual assessments of English learners’ progress learning English. And yet, they provide critical data points for measuring the depths of the pandemic’s effects on students’ learning.*

*“This is controversial, and not everybody loves it, but I think we have to assess where kids are,” former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan explained why this matters [on a panel](#) at the end of last summer. “Let’s figure out what their strengths and weaknesses are, where they are, and then hold ourselves accountable as educators: can we help accelerate them? Can we help them move? To somehow think that we can just guess, or just assume by looking at kids that we know where they are today, for me, that’s education malpractice.”*

To continue reading, go [here](#).

On a similar note, Andrea Gabor writes, “The Los Angeles and San Diego school systems want teachers to stop penalizing students for bad behavior and poor work habits. That’ll just hurt the people the changes are supposed to help.”

*I'm a teacher with serious misgivings about the wisdom of traditional grading systems. So my heart leaped a little when I learned that Los Angeles and San Diego are moving away from them.*

*On closer inspection, I'm not so hopeful. While I've long regarded grades as having the kind of toxic impact on student learning that petrochemicals have on the environment, the path taken by California's two largest school districts risks dumbing down education and hurting the students it seeks to help.*

*The changes are fine in theory. They aim to give students an opportunity to revise their work and retake tests, ideas that have merit. Moreover, they come in response to a troubling increase in the number of D's and F's assigned in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and school closures; the traditional grading system, reformers reasonably argued, was widening educational inequities.*

*However, the most worrying aspect of California's social-justice approach to grading is the directive to teachers that they not penalize students for "behavior, work habits and missed deadlines."*

To read on, go [here](#).

In other post-Covid doings, *The Wall Street Journal* reports, "Schools Cancel Classes to Give Teachers and Students Mental-Health Days."

*School districts nationwide are canceling classes for what they are calling mental-health days, saying students and staff need the breaks to handle the [pressure of returning to school](#) during the Covid-19 pandemic.*

*It is another way this era for K-12 education is unlike any other, as educators rush to make up for lost instructional time while simultaneously managing last-minute closures for quarantine, a [lack of bus and cafeteria staff](#) and, now, the need to take a break from stress.*

*The practice caught on in early November when many districts in the Southeast opted to create a long weekend by canceling school on Nov. 12, the Friday after Veterans Day, according to Burbio, a Pelham, N.Y., data company that is monitoring K-12 school closures in 5,000 districts across the country. The announcement of closures accelerated in the middle of the month as many school districts decided to cancel classes the entire week of Thanksgiving, said Dennis Roche, Burbio president.*

*"The volume was really high, really quickly," he said.*

*There have been at least 3,145 school closures specifically for mental-health needs so far this year, predominantly in North Carolina, Virginia and Missouri, according to Burbio. That represents more than a third of the 8,692 school closures so far this year, which have mostly been for quarantine or staffing reasons.*

To learn more, go [here](#).

As public schools are depopulating, Los Angeles could be hit even harder than other districts, as attendance is off by [27,000](#) students, or 6 percent of the total. That number could balloon when a strict vaccine mandate for students 12 and older goes into effect after Christmas break in January. At this time, [34,000 students](#) are not fully vaccinated, and needless to say, any easing of Covid mandates is a non-starter for the [United Teachers of Los Angeles](#).

*Families that don't comply will have to enroll their children outside of L.A. Unified or transfer them to City of Angels, an independent study program that was adapted this year to include some live online instruction. City of Angels has been [beset by staffing shortages and instability](#). Parents of students with special needs have been [particularly upset at the limitations](#) of the program — and many students waited weeks before being able to receive any meaningful instruction.*

*Having earlier deadlines gives district officials more time to prepare for what could happen. About 16,000 students are currently enrolled in City of Angels. The possible influx of many thousands more would have the potential to overwhelm the program.*

To learn more, go [here](#).

On a statewide level the Bay Area News Group writes in an editorial that, “California education dollars must be targeted for real change.”

*It's been eight years since then-Gov. Jerry Brown restructured California's school funding formulas to direct billions of dollars to the state's neediest students.*

*But, in 2019, state Auditor Elaine Howle [confirmed](#) what critics had been saying for years: State and local tax money allocated under the formula had apparently been used instead to boost overall spending throughout school districts. [It wasn't exactly clear](#) where the money had gone once it reached the districts.*

*Howle's findings are reinforced by [a new report](#) this month from Policy Analysis for California Education, an independent research center that draws from Stanford, University of Southern California and the University of California campuses at Berkeley, Davis and Los Angeles. The academics also found that a lack of financial accountability allows districts to avoid spending the extra money where it was intended and where it could do the most good.*

*It's time for state lawmakers to put an end to this wastefulness, mandate meaningful accountability and ensure that the money is targeted to provide real change. It's unacceptable that California test scores continue to [significantly lag](#) the national average, and that the state has failed to close the achievement gap that divides along racial and economic lines.*

To read on, go [here](#).

“A proposed California ballot measure would make good schools a constitutional right,” reports *The Wall Street Journal*.

*Silicon Valley entrepreneur Dave Welch is trying to improve California’s education system. He tells me we need “accountability of quality education.” You may recall the 2014 Vergara v. California decision, a suit Mr. Welch and others funded. Filed on behalf of nine public-school students, the ruling found that five California statutes related to teacher tenure, firing bad teachers and layoff policy violated the state’s Constitution. In his ruling, Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Rolf M. Treu noted, “Evidence has been elicited in this trial of the specific effect of grossly ineffective teachers on students. The evidence is compelling. Indeed, it shocks the conscience.”*

*No matter. The California Court of Appeal reversed Vergara in 2016 stating: “With no proper showing of a constitutional violation, the court is without power to strike down the challenged statutes.” In the court’s view, the California Constitution guarantees merely a free public education.*

*So Mr. Welch was back where he started, with, he says, an “educational system that doesn’t prioritize its actions to educate the children to a degree necessary to function in our society.” Bad teachers are constitutionally protected.*

*But with his background as a logically thinking Cornell-educated engineer, he set out to prove bad teaching was “a constitutional violation.” In the Democrat-controlled California Legislature, that was going to be a tough sell. Teachers were the fourth-largest campaign contributors to California’s legislative races in 2020 behind energy, prison guards and healthcare. “The Legislature won’t listen to the people,” Mr. Welch grumbles.*

*Fortunately, Californians can change their constitution through ballot initiatives. And voilà, a group named Kids First including Mr. Welch filed the Constitutional Right to a High-Quality Public Education Act. Here’s the key provision: “Any law, regulation, or policy, or any official action affecting students generally, which does not put the interest of the students first, shall be deemed to deny this right.”*

To learn more, go [here](#).

On the school choice front, we mentioned last month that there is a [school choice initiative](#) headed for the California ballot in 2022. And now there is a second initiative on the same subject. From the “Education Savings Accounts Act of 2022” fact sheet:

*Parents are ultimately responsible for their children. They should have the choice and resources necessary to provide the best education opportunities for their kids, including and especially for those in low or middle-income communities. Financial barriers have many parents feeling that they have no options but to send their children to neighborhood schools. Their children’s future should be based on their aptitude, not their zip code. Every child is entitled to a free K-12 education.*

*Education Savings Accounts are the answer!*

- *Students can opt into a K-12 savings account with \$13,000 a year in state education funds.*
- *Parents can send their kids to an accredited school or homeschool of their choice.*
- *Funds can be used for tuition and other eligible education expenses.*
- *Children from low to medium-income families get initial access in the first four years.*
- *Up to \$60,000 of leftover funds can be saved for college.*

To learn more, go [here](#). (We will feature a side-by-side comparison of the two bills when it is available.)

Anyone wishing to make a year-end donation to CTEN can do so very simply through a personal check or PayPal – [here](#). As a non-profit, we exist and operate only through the generosity and support of people like you. (And to those of you who already regularly donate – our heartfelt thanks!)

It has been another exciting year for CTEN, and we look forward to an even more vigorous 2021. We are grateful for your interest and involvement, and wish you and your families the happiest of holidays. See you next year!

Sincerely,  
Larry Sand  
CTEN President