

STAR PROGRAM

Ongoing Conflicts Between the State Board of Education and the Superintendent of Public Instruction as Well as Continued Errors Impede the Program's Success

Audit Highlights . . .

Our review of the California Department of Education's (department), State Board of Education's (board), and superintendent of public instruction's (superintendent) implementation of the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program disclosed:

- Open conflict between the superintendent and the board as well as errors on the part of school districts and the test publisher have negatively affected the program.*
- The superintendent has not developed an annual implementation plan, as law requires.*
- During the first two test cycles—spring 1998 and spring 1999—the department did not closely monitor the performance of the test publisher. The program has been plagued with missed deadlines, unreliable data, and inaccurate reporting of achievement test results.*
- The department must take further action to ensure the success of the Public School Accountability Act of 1999, such as pushing for better test security.*

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The Joint Legislative Audit Committee asked us to conduct an audit regarding the implementation and execution of the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program. Our audit focuses on the roles and responsibilities of the California Department of Education (department), the Superintendent of Public Instruction (superintendent), the State Board of Education (board), school districts, and test publishers in implementing, administering, and reporting the STAR program. Specifically, we found:

Finding #1: Conflict between the board, superintendent, and department undermine the STAR program.

The California Education Code (code) gives the board the authority to adopt policies for the governance of kindergarten through grade 12 in public schools. The code further states that the role of the superintendent and the department is to administer the board's policies. Historically, the board and the superintendent have not always agreed whether certain issues are matters of policy or administration. The decades-old conflict between these educational bodies continues and has negatively affected all aspects of the STAR program.

To facilitate communication between the board, superintendent, and the department and to create a more productive environment for the STAR program, we recommended that:

- The Legislature should establish a mechanism for appointing a mediator to resolve disputes that will most certainly continue concerning these entities' respective roles and responsibilities.
- With the help of the mediator, the board and the department should establish a memorandum of understanding that outlines their respective roles and responsibilities for implementing the STAR program.

Legislative Action: Unknown.

We are unaware of any legislative action implementing this recommendation.

Department and Board Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The department and the board did not address the establishment of a memorandum of understanding but report that they are able to work together without the assistance of an outside mediator. Specifically, legislation giving the department administrative responsibility over the STAR program allows it to provide better direction to the test publisher. Moreover, the department and the board have had weekly meetings to communicate information on testing and to plan STAR administration.

Finding #2: The STAR program lacks an implementation plan.

State law requires the superintendent to submit to the Legislature a plan for producing valid, reliable, and comparable individual student scores. However, the superintendent has not developed such a plan for the STAR program.

We recommended that the superintendent should develop an annual implementation plan as mandated by law. Further, the plan should explain how to communicate instructions to the test publisher and include:

- A decision matrix that shows the representatives who must be present from each entity before a decision is accepted.
- Timelines indicating all anticipated actions to be taken by the board and the department.

Department Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The department did not address the superintendent's development of an annual implementation plan. However, it did report that it has been working continuously with the test publisher to plan a test item-development process, develop procedures for field testing test items, and obtain research information on testing to facilitate the production of valid and reliable test results for both language arts and mathematics. It also states that this work is included in the test publisher's 2001 contract.

Finding #3: Poor communication between state entities causes the test publisher to receive conflicting instructions.

For the spring 2000 test cycle, the department contracted directly with the test publisher. Despite this contract, weak communication among the department, the board, and the test publisher continues. Several times during the spring 2000 test cycle, the board and department gave the test publisher conflicting instructions.

We recommended that the department must continue its weekly meetings with the test publisher, as outlined in the 2000 contract. It should also ensure that it places similar requirements in all future contracts. We also recommended that the board and the department must establish a formal meeting schedule to make sure that the board is kept abreast of ongoing program issues.

Department and Board Action: Corrective action taken.

The department reports it continues to meet and hold conference calls weekly with the test publisher's staff, as required in the test publisher's 2000 contract. A similar requirement is also in the test publisher's 2001 contract. It also reports that both it and the board continue to meet weekly to communicate information on STAR implementation.

Finding #4: The State did not properly monitor the test publisher's performance.

There appears to have been very little monitoring of the test publisher's performance by the department in the first two test cycles, spring 1998 and 1999. The superintendent did not establish a method for working with the test publisher to ensure that the achievement test results are valid, reliable, and comparable, as state law requires. Thus, a clear description of the scope of the work; a timeline for major activities and milestones; a plan for monitoring the test publisher's performance; and defined roles and responsibilities for the department, board, and test publisher did not exist. Consequently, the test publisher's performance during the first two years was problematic, particularly during the spring 1999 test cycle. To improve its performance, the test publisher obtained the services of a consultant to identify breakdowns in its operations and those of its subcontractors.

We recommended that the board and department should review the recommendations of the test publisher's consultant and amend the current contract to ensure that the test publisher does implement all recommendations that will improve the STAR program.

Department and Board Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The board and department report that, where possible, they have ensured that the consultant's recommendations were incorporated into the planning and program procedures for STAR 2001. However, they made no indications that the contract was amended to ensure that the test publisher implements all recommendations.

Finding #5: School district training can increase the integrity of the STAR program.

For the first two years of the STAR program, school district and test publisher errors prevented the department from posting complete and accurate test results for public viewing on the Internet by the yearly statutory deadline of June 30. Delays in reporting accurate and complete test results can have a significant effect on the State's Academic Performance Index (API), which is used to distribute about \$150 million earmarked for schools and teachers under the Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999. Currently, the achievement test results comprise 100 percent of the API.

To ensure the integrity of the testing process and the accuracy of the information given, we recommended that the department should calculate the additional costs of requiring all school districts and testing personnel to attend training courses on properly administering the test and accurately reporting necessary demographic information. If the costs are reasonable in relation to the total program costs, the department should take the necessary actions for requiring all relevant personnel to attend this training.

Department Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The department reports that it has taken a number of steps to improve training materials and the training process. For the spring 2001 test cycle, the department intends to provide school districts with an enhanced video training tape to improve training for teachers and test proctors. It also is attempting to revise all testing manuals and pretest workshops to clarify areas that have been problematic. Finally, the department has determined that it does not have legal authority to mandate that all school district staff administering the STAR program attend training classes.