

Opinion: Calif.'s education architecture failing

By Joe Mathews

Is California abandoning its poorest students?

That question would be dismissed as absurd by our state's education leaders, especially Gov. Jerry Brown and the state Board of Education. For years, they have been building a new educational architecture they say will do more for the poorest kids in the poorest schools.



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But as the many elements of this architecture are put in place, they have grown so complicated that the entire structure seems incoherent. It's possible that this new architecture could undermine public accountability, resist public engagement, and obscure how disadvantaged students are really doing.

The new architecture is built on a foundation known as the Local Control Funding Formula, a multi-piece formula designed to give more money and authority to school districts, especially those with concentrated poverty. That formula is accompanied by the new Local Control and Accountability Plans, intended to give parents and communities more say in how money is spent. The state also adopted Common Core standards for math and English along with a computer-based testing system to

better track individual students.

Last month, the State Board of Education wrapped all these elements together in a new accountability system to track their progress.

But the way that system was approved exposes the complexity, and shoddiness, of the new architecture. The system introduces six statewide indicators for measuring schools that go beyond test scores and local factors, like parental school climate. But it could be years before such measurements are a reality, since much of the required data does not currently exist.

Even worse, the board resisted urgent calls from child advocacy groups to boil down this new system into a rating that the public might be able to understand. Instead, the board, defiantly, released a sprawling draft built around a confounding color-coded grid. "Making sense of it is practically impossible," the Los Angeles Times editorialized.

Fixing this accountability system isn't just a matter of redesign. The trouble is that it is built upon the other pieces of the new architecture, and those are similarly confusing. The new local control formula encompasses eight priorities, myriad sub-priorities, and different grants. The Local Control and Accountability Plans aren't local or even really plans. They are longwinded, technical answers to technical questions required by the state; the resulting "plans" run to hundreds of pages.

And if all that doesn't give you a headache, the new system is soon to get even more complicated. California's new architecture does not mesh with the federal government's own new process to identify the worst-off schools, and improve them. Last week, Gov. Brown vetoed a bill, overwhelmingly passed in the legislature, to require the California system to align with the federal one. Eventually, there could be not one but two accountability systems for California schools—one

answerable to Sacramento, the other to Washington.

In watching this process, I can't help but wonder if all the confusion isn't cynically deliberate. Throughout, the state has followed the advice of its powerful teachers union, the California Teachers Association, which has opposed any system that offers coherent ratings, and thus meaningful comparisons, of schools.

What does that mean for making sure poor kids are actually making progress? It means they may be on their own. Gov. Brown gave the game away in an interview with the policy website CALMatters earlier this year when he questioned whether the achievement gaps between disadvantaged and other students can be closed, even with the help of his Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).

"The gap has been pretty persistent," he said, "so I don't want to set up what hasn't been done ever as the test of whether the LCFF is a success or failure. I don't know why you would go there." Closing achievement gaps is "pretty hard to do," he added.

The defenses of the emerging system are equally lame. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson has argued that the complexity of the new system is a virtue—since education, and life for that matter, is complex.

The State Board of Education president Michael Kirst, a Stanford scholar whose writing on educational systems is distinguished by its clarity, has in this instance taken to issuing uncharacteristically foggy pleas for delay. We're still ironing out the kinks and the whole system will evolve continuously, he argues. "Concluding now that the system is too complex," he wrote for the website EdSource, "would be no different than arguing that people would not be able to use a smart phone based on the engineering specifications when the device is still in development."

Kirst is right about the need for patience, in a way. It will take at least until 2019, when California finally gets a new governor, before Californians will have any chance to stop construction on this incomprehensible mess, and to focus coherently on our poorest students.