Opinion: Annual testing a good assessment of student achievement

By Vicki Barber

I recently watched a rerun of “Little House on the Prairie.” All the children were in a one-room schoolhouse that I remember my grandmother talking about when she was a child. In those days, you took a test at the end of the year, left school for the summer, and came back the next September to take up where you left off unless you stayed on the farm to help.

Things are a bit different now, or maybe not so much. We all know that at the end of every year kids take a series of tests. In California, we call them STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting Program) tests. The tests are usually given in April or May to ensure that much of the teaching and learning has already been completed before testing.

In August, school districts receive their assessment data from the year before and, of course, the first question is how did the kids do? Did they learn anything last year? Did they get what was taught? Educators use the assessment data to give teachers an idea about how much of the previous year’s curriculum children learned. Teachers also use this data to make determinations as to where exactly to begin the current year’s instruction.



Vicki Barber

No, the tests don’t cover everything. A young child might have learned that dogs have large teeth, bark loudly, and protect you when the police officer came to school with his canine companion. A question about a dog may not show up on the test but a question like 2 + 2=_____ would. Both items are important, but only one will be tested. Both items will be stored in a child’s brain for future reference.

The STAR tests are mainly concerned with how much core academic learning a child has acquired. The results from each child are combined with those of the rest of the school, the district, and the state, to give the public an idea of how much core academic learning is taking place. A major goal at the national level is for every child to be at or above proficiency in English-Language Arts/ELA (reading, writing, and oral language) and Mathematics for his or her grade level by the year 2014.

So how’d we do this year? In 2010, in California, 52 percent of the 2-11 grade students who took the tests scored at or above proficiency in ELA. That’s a significant improvement from the 35 percent proficiency rate of the students who took those tests in 2003.

Math is a bit harder to analyze because of all of the types of math available in high school, but in grades 2-7, 48 percent of California’s students scored at or above proficient in math this year, while we were only at 35 percent able to do proficient or above math work in 2003.

Science end of the year tests are up from 29 percent in at or above proficiency in 2003 to 40 percent proficient or above at this point in time. History-Social Science has risen from 29 percent in 2003 at or above proficiency to 44 percent in 2010.

We are pleased to note that El Dorado County students continue to show improvement in all core curriculum areas and consistently score higher than the state in these areas as well. In 2010, 66.3 percent of El Dorado County students scored at or above the proficient level in English-language arts. In mathematics, 60.9 percent of El Dorado County students scored at or above the proficient level, while in history-social science 57 percent and in science 69.2 percent of El Dorado County students scored at or above the proficient level.

When looking at test data, it is also important to consider the results of the California High School Exit Exam which high school students are required to pass prior to receiving their high school diploma. Once again, El Dorado County students are scoring extremely well. In 2010, 83 percent of our students passed the English-language arts portion of the test as compared to 64% of students statewide. In mathematics, 80 percent of our students passed the CAHSEE as compared to 63 percent of students statewide. Please keep in mind that this data represents the percentage of students who pass this exam in their 10th-grade year. Those who do not pass at this point will have additional opportunities to take and pass the test in their 11th- and 12th-grade years.

So what does that mean? It means we still give tests at the end of the year just like we did when Laura Ingalls Wilder reminded us of a much earlier school life. The tests may look more complex than they did back then, but we all know that there’s certainly a lot more information for children to know in 2010. Although end of year assessment is not an exact science yet, it definitely helps all of us know how to help more and more children meet the challenges of today’s prairie.

Vicki Barber is superintendent of education for El Dorado County.

SF Comedy Fest comes to Tahoe

The preliminary round of the 35th annual San Francisco International Comedy Festival will be at MontBleu casino in Stateline on Sept. 18 at 8pm.

Tahoe's comedy elimination competition will feature a dozen finalists who make it through qualifying rounds of hundreds this week at various Northern California venues. Comics have 5-7 minute to woo the audience and judges. The final round of competition is Oct. 3-9.

For details, click here.

Contestants from past years include Robin Williams, Ellen DeGeneres, Dane Cook, Dana Carvey, Roseanne Barr, Mark Curry and represent the pedigree of hot, national comedy club talent.

Karen Rontowski, an upbeat, granola-esque comedian is the evening's host.Described as a "New Age Hippie," her experience has earned headliner billing worldwide opening for legends such as Bob Hope and Ray Charles.

Tickets are $25 and are available at www.ticketmaster.com or the MontBleu box office at 800.648.3353.

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



• August's South Shore Relay for Life raised $56,000.

• Chase International's Reno office has expanded to include a new property management division. The division, headed by Lois Kidder and Lisa Wallace, will focus on long-term residential and commercial property management in the Reno-Sparks and Zephyr Cove areas.

• Moss Adams accounting firm this month released stats showing Kirkwood Mountain Resort had record profits for the 2009-10 fiscal year ending in July. The resort reported net profits that were 25 percent higher than any prior year in Kirkwood's history and this marks the second year in a row the resort posted a gain of more than 50 percent.

• Kahle Community Park is taking signups for girls in grades 3-6 who want to participate in a 3-on-3 basketball league. Deadline is Oct. 1.

• The California Department of Fish & Game has delayed implementation of the Paiute Cutthroat Trout Restoration Project in Silver King Creek until 2011 because of potential contracting difficulties arising from the lack of a state budget.

• John Merryfield of Kings Beach is going to paddleboard around the 72 miles of Lake Tahoe to raise money about farm animals.

• South Lake Tahoe's 10 City Council candidates were invited to a three-hour session with city officials last week to learn

about what they might be getting themselves into; info on the budget; Brown Act rules; and a lesson in ethics.

Opinion: Yes on Prop. 20, No. on Prop. 27

By Alice Huffman

According to a recent Field Poll, a dismal 16 percent of California voters approve of the job the Legislature is doing, and just 19 percent approve of Congress – the lowest congressional rating in the history of the poll.

This is not surprising, considering that politicians on both sides of the aisle are seemingly unable or unwilling to effectively address the massive problems our state faces in light of a $19 billion budget deficit. What is surprising – shocking, really – is the number of politicians fervently focusing their energies on maintaining the dysfunctional status quo, simply so they can retain their power.

Read the whole story

Alice Huffman is the president of the California NAACP.

Environmentalists expected

more success stories with lawmakers

By Evan Halper, Marc Lifsher and Patrick McGreevy, Los Angeles Times

SACRAMENTO -– Environmentalists were counting on big gains in Sacramento this summer, with a governor eager to burnish his green credentials in his final months in office. But by the time the legislative session ended at midnight Tuesday, those hopes had fizzled.

Activists had worked for passage of such pioneering measures as a ban on plastic grocery bags and expanded use of the sun, wind and other renewable resources to power California homes and businesses. But the bold proposals they saw as a springboard to nationwide environmental efforts collapsed in the face of aggressive industry opposition that included intensive lobbying, television advertising and even mail to voters.

“We’re in shock,” said Mark Gold, president of the nonprofit Heal the Bay, which had helped lead a large coalition of activists, retailers and unions crusading for the bag ban.

Read the whole story

Roast on the Range in Truckee

On Sept. 25 at 2pm share in locally-raised, seasonal foods as Moody’s Bistro Executive Chef Mark Estee and Chef de Cuisine Guy Frenette roast a Berkshire hog raised in pasture at the

small, sustainable Shaw Family Farms in Truckee during Roast on the Range.

· Proceeds from this event will benefit Girls on the Run – Sierra, a life-changing, nonprofit prevention program for girls in grades 3-8. Their mission is to educate and prepare girls for a lifetime of self-respect and healthy living.

· Tickets are $100/person, and include a dinner prepared by Estee and Frenette, wine, live music, and tours of this local farm. A free butcher demonstration will be that Saturday from 9-10:30am on the back patio of Moody's Bistro.

· For tickets, email jbossin@gmail.com or call (530) 587.1690

· Roast on the Range witll take place at the Shaw Family Farms, located at 12654 Samuel Drive in Truckee. The butcher demonstration will take place at Moody's Bistro, 10007 Bridge St. in Truckee.

3-day outdoor expo in Placerville

Lovers of the great outdoors in El Dorado County can gather at the fairgrounds in Placerville this October for the first Gateway to the Sierra Sportsman's Outdoor Expo.

The Oct. 1-3 expo celebrates the rich and plentiful opportunities for outdoor recreation in El Dorado County, from fishing and hunting to boating, archery, biking, barbecuing and more.

The expo will provide information and resources about the things people love to do in this region.

Highlights of the three-day expo include seminars and hands-on demonstrations in such topics as fly fishing, bear hunting and river guide services, as well as special hands-on demonstrations for children. Also featured are vendors in outdoor sports offering the latest know-how and equipment, clothing and accessories. A gun show will also be presented by the Buck Shop.

Barbecue fans are invited to come watch how the pros do it in the KCBS sanctioned Smokin' for Gold BBQ Cook Off on Oct. 2. This competition features teams competing for prize money and the grand champion trophy.

On Oct. 3 everyone is invited to try their hand at the grill in the "just for fun" Open BBQ Cook Off. Following each event, expo attendees are welcome to sample the cooks' creations during People's Choice tasting events, five tastes for $10.

On the evening of Oct. 2, the expo presents live music and dancing on the green featuring the country tunes of the popular regional band Hired Guns. The music, from 7-11pm is included with admission to the expo or come to the concert only for $5.

Visit the website for a full list of Expo activities, vendor information and daily schedules.

El Dorado County Fairgrounds is at 100 Placerville Drive in Placerville.

Tickets: Adults $8 • Children (6-12) $5 • Under 6 free • 3-Day Pass: Adults $20 • Children (6-12) $12 • Concert only $5.

Best in Basin nominations sought by TRPA

The nomination period has opened for the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's 2010 Best in the Basin awards program, which annually recognizes the best designed, planned and implemented projects in the Tahoe basin that also stand out as environmentally compatible.

The Best in the Basin program calls attention to projects of all categories – from natural restoration to commercial or residential construction – that carry with them environmental net gains for Lake Tahoe and its communities.

For more than two decades, the Best in the Basin program has recognized those property owners, contractors, architects and planners whose work and investment should be held up as examples to follow.

The nomination period ends Oct. 15. Categories are:

· new residential

· residential modification

· rebuild projects

· new commercial

· commercial modification

· commercial rebuild

· shorezone

· green building

· public service

· erosion control

· restoration

· BMP retrofit

· defensible space

· mixed-use project

· green remodel.

To qualify, projects must be complete or near completion. For an entry form and information about last year’s winners, click here.

Mixed results for LTUSD in statewide test scores

By Kathryn Reed

Tahoe Valley Elementary School’s falling statewide test scores was in stark contrast to how most of the schools in Lake Tahoe Unified School District performed.

The Academic Performance Index is the measure the state uses to determine how students are doing from one year to the next. Results were released Monday. Overall, the state posted a gain of 13 points.

“While we cannot be satisfied until the achievement gap is eliminated and all students are well-prepared for college and careers, this significant progress should be celebrated,” state Superintendent of Education Jack O’Connell said in a statement.



Bijou elementary students exceeded expectation on state test scores.

The problem with President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind policy is that the scores do not compare apples to apples. For example, results for this year’s fourth-graders are compared to the previous year’s fourth-graders, not to how they did as third-graders. President Obama, with his Race to the Top, did not change the accountability factor to make it more relevant.

In LTUSD all but the magnet school is Meyers is considered a performance improvement school. The reason is the subgroups.

The testing treats everyone the same no matter their language ability, primary language or if they are special ed. That is a complaint educators have had with the system since the get-go – it’s not a level playing field.

“We do the same programs across the district,” LTUSD Superintendent Jim Tarwater said.

But the test scores would not indicate this. The environmental school, where Tarwater is also principal, had a score of 919 last year and improved 20 points to 939 with the latest testing.

“It’s not just the wealthy. We have problems like anyone else,

though it is pretty homogenous," Tarwater said of the demographics at the magnet school.

To be PI means year after year not meeting the goal the state sets. The state says 800 points is where all school should be and then sets goals to reach that number.

Tahoe Valley's scores tumbled from 820 to 788.

"They have to zero-in and find out what the difference was, what happened between classes," Tarwater said. "The interesting thing is they did exactly what they did last year. They did the monitoring and the intervention."

LTUSD is not alone in having students in academically challenged schools. Between El Dorado, Placer, Yolo and Sacramento counties there are approximately 94,000 students in PI schools.

A bright spot for LTUSD is Bijou Community School. For the second consecutive year it surpassed the state's target. It was supposed to improve upon last year's total of 689 by six points and instead did so by 29 for a score of 718.

"We are excited because that staff for three years has been committed to breaking the 700 mark. So now they are aiming for 800," Tarwater said.

This fall the district expects to hear from the state if Bijou will continue to be categorized as PI.

Tarwater told *Lake Tahoe News* the continued improvement at the school has to do with collaboration of teachers, drilling down with students, tracking academic performance on a individual basis to know what students need additional help with, and dedication of staff and administrators.

Sierra House also exceeded expectations. It shot up 14 points to 813 when the goal was a one-point increase.

“Their Latino population made some good growth,” Tarwater said. “One thing I’m excited about at all the school is the numbers in the white population is well in the upper 800s, including Bijou. What you are seeing is language is an issue.”

South Tahoe Middle School’s scores were flat, dropping a point to 792.

South Tahoe High School met its goal – gaining nine points for a score of 759.

Obama’s Race to the Top program, for which states must compete for dollars and California didn’t get any, is going to have the same standards for all students in the academic year 2013-14. Tarwater said the federal standards do not dilute what LTUSD and California are doing.

A complaint often heard from parents, students and educators is the lack of diversity in curriculum. With so much emphasis on language arts and math, other core subjects and a substantive number of electives have been scratched.

The Lake Tahoe Unified board is expected this school year to discuss ways to re-introduce electives, especially at the middle school. The idea is then students will be better prepared for the array of offerings at the high school.

In these economic times and continued state take-aways, LTUSD is unique in California to continue its class-size reduction, music, physical education and sports programs. But the goal is to do even more.

Belly dance competition at LTCC

Jewel of the Sierra Belly Dance Competition is Sept. 18 from 11am-10pm.

Participants will compete in five categories: Sapphire (Non-Professional), Ruby (Groups), Emerald (Live Music), Crystal (fusion of different dance and music), and Diamond (Professional).

The judges will be scoring each competitor based on appearance, musical interpretation, technique, use of stage, presentation, entertainment value, and personality.

The event is at Lake Tahoe Community College’s Duke Theatre, One College Drive, South Lake Tahoe.

For more information, call (530) 541.4660, ext. 207.

The entrance fee for the Jewel of the Sierra competition show is $15.