Education Equity Organizations Call on California Officials to Address Alarming Drop in 11th Grade Academic Performance

SACRAMENTO – Earlier this month, the California Department of Education (CDE) released the 2018 Smarter Balanced test scores. These scores, which provide a statewide picture of student performance in math and English Language Arts (ELA), are alarming – especially for 11th graders. As an alliance of education advocacy organizations, we urge the CDE, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and the State Board of Education to take swift action to formally examine the decline in performance of California’s 11th graders.

Eleventh graders’ scores declined nearly 4 percentage points in ELA. In math, they dropped nearly a point. Results are particularly concerning when isolated by subgroup: Low-income 11th graders’ ELA scores decreased three points and African American 11th graders’ ELA scores fell nearly five points, for example. 11th grade migrant students’ math scores fell, as did 11th grade Latinx students, low-income students and English learners. This data underscores the latest findings from the Stanford University-led Getting Down to Facts II study which indicated that the majority of California’s 11th graders are not prepared for higher education.

A decline in the performance of high school students, when California public schools are supposed to have prepared them for 21st century careers, should merit a concerned and public response. Instead, the Superintendent of Public Instruction’s official statement of the scores made no mention of the 11th grade slide. That concerns us. So, we’re sounding the alarm. Here’s some suggestions of what the CDE, Superintendent of Public Instruction and Board of Education should do:

1. **Admit there’s a problem.** The official statement on the scores, as the *Los Angeles Times* editorial board put it, “would get an A for creativity – and obfuscation.” The *Times* was right, and obfuscation surely won’t help California’s 11th graders. The leaders of California’s public education system should start by telling the public the truth: It’s frightening that 11th grade scores declined. Moving backward is certainly not a sign that our schools are preparing students for college, careers or life.
2. **Investigate.** Why did 11th grade scores decline? What’s behind the lack of progress? With all the emphasis on “continuous improvement”, if students’ scores are sliding backward, then attempts at improvement are simply not working. (Notably, this is an area where individual student growth metrics could be illuminating.) There’s clearly a problem, and we believe the leaders of California’s public education system have a responsibility to the public to get to the bottom of the issue and explain the lack of progress to the public.

Despite the historic delayed release of this year's scores, there's still time to take meaningful corrective action so that California’s future 11th graders don’t slide backward even further. There certainly cannot be continuous improvement without acknowledging failure to grow and taking meaningful action. We look forward to the urgency with which the CDE, SPI and Board address this year’s results.

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