

Education *Matters*

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QUALITY COUNTS

Doesn't It?

By Kate Walsh and Sandi Jacobs



It's March, so it must be time for *Quality Counts*, *Education Week's* annual report card on the quality of states' education policies. The 2008 edition includes a spanking new set of teacher quality indicators used to rate states, ranging from teacher salaries to professional development. Last year's *Quality Counts* left out any ratings for states in the area of teacher quality, after its editors lost confidence in the indicators they had been using and decided to go back to the drawing board.

Do the new indicators get any closer to what matters? Mostly yes, but there are a few notable clunkers. We certainly have our own opinions about how states could address teacher quality—spelled out in our State Teacher Policy Yearbook—but our issue with *Quality Counts* is more than a territorial claim.

To its credit, *Quality Counts* takes a

fairly progressive view of the teaching profession as well as broadens the scope to include important factors such as school leadership. The editors have also added a great indicator giving states credit for reducing a new teacher's workload.

QUALITY CONTROL?

However, a number of indicators appear to suggest a state is serious about tackling teacher quality but which actually have little impact on students in the classroom. State-led professional development efforts, which tend to embody all the worst things about ineffective professional development, fall into that category.

Another is an absolute jaw-dropper for its inclusion as an indicator: class size reduction.

There is simply no evidence that state-funded class size reduction initiatives

help teacher quality. For starters, the country does not have enough teachers of the quality needed to staff the current number of classrooms. Even if teachers were available to staff a classroom reduction initiative, states would have to provide staggering amounts of funding to bring classrooms down to a small enough size to make a difference. Much has been documented about California's infamous class size reduction initiative, which led to statewide teacher shortages and declining student test scores.

There's certainly no research basis for *Quality Counts'* insertion of class size into the teacher quality equation. McKinsey and Company's recent report, drawing on the work of Eric Hanushek and others, noted that of 112 studies of the impact of reduced class sizes, only nine found a positive relationship, and none of these effects was substantial.

Quality Counts errs as well by giving states credit when none is deserved. For instance, it credits thirty-nine states with requiring basic skills tests of prospective teachers. Yes, these states do technically have this requirement, but well over half of these states do not make this test a condition when it is needed; that is, when the candidate applies to ed school. The consequence is that ed schools routinely admit substandard candidates. They then invest valuable classroom time and taxpayer dollars to prepare them to pass a math and reading test that a middle school student should be able to pass. The practice borders on the negligent and is unique to this country. It is certainly not something for which to applaud a state.

Similarly, *Quality Counts* gives credit to forty-seven states for having an alternative certification program. Yet, the routes in more than half of these states are, in every respect, no different than what is required for traditional certification. Even more troubling is the practice of states renaming their emergency license as an “alternative” license in order to comply with NCLB requirements. It is a level of gaming the system that no one should tolerate. By our admittedly tough count, only six states offer a genuine alternate route, but even allowing a loose definition to apply,

only thirty states offer one that is not actually an emergency license in disguise.

RISKY BUSINESS

Much of the data reported in *Quality Counts* is collected by a rather risky method, in which officials in the states’ departments of education answer a survey. While *Quality Counts*’ editors claim also to require documentation, the published results reveal the inherent limitations that come with relying on states to provide a meaningful answer. For example, thirty-eight states say they grant reciprocity to teachers coming from out of state. Serving as the supplied documentation that *Quality Counts*’ editors require, states would likely have produced the interstate agreement known as the NASDTEC agreement. It is not until you peel back the terms of this so-called reciprocity agreement that you find that most states are not really waiving any requirements, even for teachers who earned a traditional license in another state. It is a meaningless system that makes states appear flexible but which, in fact, sends teachers jumping through all sorts of hoops.

In the interest of full disclosure, we will admit to feeling somewhat taken aback by the notable absence of any acknowledgment of the Yearbook. The omission of

an acknowledgment of our contribution to this area strikes us (and others such as Fordham’s *Gadfly*), at the very least, as unsportsmanlike. While we will certainly get over our bruised feelings, the bottom line is that we are much more concerned about the need to hold states firmly accountable for their role in shaping the quality of the nation’s teaching force. There is too much at stake not to do this right. ■



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This article is adapted from the Teacher Quality Bulletin.



Small Classes, Big Problems

In November 2002, Florida voters amended the state constitution to mandate that classes from pre-k through third-grade have no more than eighteen kids, grades four through eight no more than twenty-two, and grades nine through twelve no more than twenty-five. These targets do not have to be met class-by-class until fall 2008.

Republican State Senator Don Gaetz predicts “a lot of meetings ... where angry parents are demanding to know why their children can’t go to school in their neighborhood school.” School officials are themselves confused: Will they be forced to turn students away on account of class-size limits?

If schools do have to accommodate the extra youngsters, it will certainly mean making more classes. The campus of Sickles High School in Tampa is, for example, now home to twenty-four portables, which is ten more than it had last year.

Florida’s class size amendment is proving extraordinarily expensive and disruptive for something that is based on the dubious idea that academic achievement is tied to a magical number of desks in a classroom. Perhaps now, when the amendment’s practical consequences are beginning to be felt, Sunshine State voters will reconsider the choice they made in 2002.

Source—“Class limits raise anxiety,” by Letitia Stein, St. Petersburg Times, January 5, 2007

Teacher Now Free to Support Anti-Slavery Group

Union Overruled, Religious Objectors Favored

Teachers in Washington and Oregon (states that demand union fees as a condition of employment; i.e., they are not right-to-work states) have the First Amendment right to express a religious objection and direct their union dues to a charity.

Historically, the teacher union has exercised veto power over the religious objector's choice of charity. For example, it has denied teachers choosing to direct their dues to the Association of American Educators Foundation which uses the funds to provide teacher scholarships and mini grants or to charities that do not align with the union's political agenda. In the case below, the teacher union objected to the teacher directing her union fees to Shared Hope International, a charity devoted to preventing and eradicating sex trafficking and slavery.

In a recent ruling, the Washington State Public Employment Relations Commission (PERC) ruled that religious objectors can choose which organization to receive their union dues as long as it is nonreligious and a charity. The Washington Education Association is appealing the decision.

In August 2005 Susan Wiggs requested to resign from the Vancouver Education Association (VEA) in Vancouver, Washington. State and federal law allow teachers and other workers to leave their union on religious grounds and send their dues to a charitable organization. Wiggs indicated her dues would go to Shared Hope International, a 501(C)(3) organization that works internationally to prevent and eradicate sex trafficking and slavery.

VEA Executive Director Roy Maier refused to acknowledge Shared Hope, saying the organization is "not acceptable" to the VEA. Wiggs provided the union with documentation of Shared Hope's nonprofit, nonsectarian status, but the union refused to accommodate her selection, and failed to provide a clear explanation for the denial.

On October 18, 2006, the VEA filed a petition against Wiggs with the Public Employment Relations Commission. Wiggs contacted the Evergreen Freedom Foundation (EFF), and EFF obtained legal representation for her PERC hearings, where she was represented by attorney Thomas F. Klein. The union argued it had the authority to approve or disapprove any nonreligious charity Wiggs designated.

During the hearings the union explained—for the first time—that Wiggs' choice of charity failed to meet three unpublished criteria it had never supplied previously. In response, Wiggs introduced evaluation guidelines the VEA had agreed to follow as a result of previous litigation. The guidelines stated, "The goal is to respect

the objector's choice of charities, so long as the designated recipient is lawful and charitable." The union also attacked and tried to discredit the well-regarded charity at the hearing. Shared Hope has a high financial rating and works in conjunction with federal agencies.

The PERC examiner issued a ruling agreeing with Wiggs on January 22. In his decision he said the law "requires the union to agree to Wiggs' designation of an organization to receive her alternative dues payments once she proves the des-



ignated organization is both nonreligious and a charity. Wiggs met her burden of proof."

"I hope other potential religious objectors learn that they have the freedom to give to their choice of charity," Susan Wiggs said.

"This is a victory for the rights of teachers," attorney Tom Klein said. "The union tried to rewrite the law to give it an absolute veto over any charity it does not like. We're happy the examiner recognized that union officials should not exert this influence over a teacher's purse. Susan has selected a charity because of her educational and philosophical interest in rescuing children from sexual exploitation and slavery. It is unfortunate that the union continues to spend member dues in intense litigation to stop a teacher from selecting the charity she wants to support."

"Teachers who do not want to belong to a union should have the freedom to control their own money," said Michael Reitz, an attorney with the Evergreen Freedom Foundation. "Susan has endured more than two years of union stonewalling. It's a shame the union is dragging this case out by appealing." ■

"I hope other potential religious objectors learn that they have the freedom to give to their choice of charity,"

Teacher Susan Wiggs



Feedb@ck

AAE Members Write about National Standards

*I*n the December edition of *Education Matters*, we featured an article from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation calling for national standards. We asked for your opinions on the article in particular and national standards in general. As always, our members hold strong beliefs about what is best for our children (as highlighted in some of the comments below). Among those of you who responded, there was a majority preference for some form of national standards that are “reliable, cumulative, and comparable.” The responses, however, are not necessarily indicative of where AAE’s entire membership stands on this issue. We will include a question or two about national standards on our next membership survey.

Concerned for Kids Who Move

I was very interested to read the front page of *Education Matters*—“The Proficiency Illusion.” I am so pleased you tackled this matter. Teachers who have been in the classroom for years (28 for me) have always had concerns about kids moving from state to state and getting students who are pitifully behind. What else could happen if we have no national standards? There are National Standards in some areas—technology, for instance. I believe they should be in place for every subject area and a national test should be aligned to those standards. If any state

chooses to embellish those standards—so be it. Then they could do state testing if they so choose. Proficiency is proficiency. It should be across the board in all levels of education nationwide. A colleague of mine who taught in Texas with me moved to Colorado just before I moved to Idaho. She taught one year and said Colorado was behind where we were in Texas 10 years ago! Those of us who have moved around some feel the same issues as professionals. We definitely need a standard for American education. Proficiency should represent just that. Excellence should represent exactly that.

—Middle School technology teacher

Account for Consistency

Before I began teaching I was an accountant. In that industry it is important to have quality comparisons between business financial statements. Thus we have CPAs and the Financial Accounting Standard Board to ensure consistency. Comparisons between schools should be consistent as well. National standards should be initiated. The risk of a poorly educated population is more damaging than the loss of money. Yet we seem to think that education will police itself from the local level. This model is not working.

—High School business education teacher

Virulently Cruel

The failure of national policy to cover even minimum educational standards has become as virulently cruel as the American medical mess. It is most callous to the children of armed service personnel, government service staff, mid-level corporate employees, and migrant laborers who are moved continually from state to state to state.

We have not actually agreed on what competence might be, even for teachers, let alone students! There are teachers as well as students who are functionally illiterate (and in more than one language!), as far as the standards of a second jurisdiction are concerned. (Even jurisdictions within the same state!)

If we cannot agree about when and what to whom, we will continue to have brutal educational discontinuities within our nation. There are substantial bodies of data on age appropriateness, learning readiness, and orderly progressions but who will take responsibility (accept accountability) for systematizing our “system” for the good of the nation as a whole? Thank you for a chance to vent!

—Retired high school science teacher

Against High Stakes Tests

Overall I am against all high stakes standardized testing. They hurt students with different intelligences and disabilities like dyslexia. My PhD brother would have been “left behind” in this system. Having said that, if we must have these tests, we must have national standardization.

—High school science teacher

National High School Exit Test

I have long contended that our country needs some sort of national standards test at the end of high school. This is even more imperative now that schools accept funds from the Dept. of Ed under the ESEA act.

—High school foreign language teacher

State-based Standards are a Farce

We need to have national standards! State-based standards are a total farce and only serve the interests of lawmakers, not teachers, parents, and students.

—Middle school reading teacher

Leave It to Local Communities

I oppose national education standards. It is rightfully the responsibility of local communities to determine the education agenda for that locality. The federal government (and state governments as much as could be achieved) should get out of the way of the free market of education. A locality may choose education standards that do not match what the national “education gurus” feel is appropriate—but those in their Ivory Towers have foisted enough bad education policy onto the American public. When localities are responsive to those in the community, the best interests of all children will be best served in the long run.

—High school science and math teacher

National Standards But Not National Control

I am a retired special education teacher, and while I have never been in favor of the federal government running our schools

(it has proven less than efficient in many areas), Finn and Petrilli make a very good case for national standards. However, states should still administer and score tests and collect data. I’m afraid the whole system will not work with special education and non-English-speaking students factored in. There is a wide range of native ability in special education kids. To sum up, I guess national standards might be OK but not national control of schools (too much of that already).

—Retired special education teacher

Minimum National Standards

I think that states should be able to set their own standards. With that said, I don’t think that it is right for states to set their standards low. I think there should be a minimum national standard set. Then individual states could set their standards higher if they so choose.

—Third-grade teacher

Set Up to Fail

After reading the article about proficiency in *Education Matters*, I agree with the authors. As a special education teacher in the state of Michigan, it seems the students are being “set up” to fail on the MEAP Test even before they can get started. Besides, NCLB is unrealistic in its goals especially for special education students. It is clear that Michigan needs to reassess its own criteria for determining proficiency on the state assessment tests. Every state should begin by examining what requirements should be in place at the high school level, then work backwards to develop what is needed all the way back to kindergarten.

—Middle school special education teacher

Proficiency Should Be Consistent State to State

During the past few years, states have developed standards that address the pressing need for clear communicable language regarding what it is that we expect students to know and understand across curricular areas for each grade level. The development of state standards has naturally led to the development of state assessments that address the need to measure learning corresponding to those standards. Clearly stated goals, objectives, and standards are absolutely necessary as we in education must be accountable for the learning of our students!

The problem arises when assessments either do not match those standards, or are not consistent across grade levels or, as is increasingly the case across state lines. The problem is not with the assessment itself but how the data is collected, used by individual teachers to drive instruction, used by districts to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers and schools, and further how schools are compared and deemed proficient or in need of improvement.

The development of national standards is a positive move as it will provide a clear set of expectations for learning across the country, providing an equitable way to evaluate that learning. A student proficient in one state should, without exception, test proficient in any other state in the country. ■

—Fourth-grade, State Teacher of the Year

Multicultural Math

Amidst relentlessly bleak international comparisons of the math performance of U.S. students, the math preparation provided by education schools is receiving some well-deserved scrutiny. The National Council on



Teacher Quality recently reported on a cross-national study of the preparation of middle school teachers ("News Flash: US Teachers Training in Mathematics Found Lacking," December 2007, www.nctq.org). Now education iconoclast Jay Greene with colleague Catherine Shock reports in this month's *City Journal* that well over half of seventy-one education schools—including fifty of the reportedly best—appear to be paying more attention to social goals such as diversity than to math.

In examining the titles and descriptions of courses offered at these seventy-one education schools, Green and Shock literally counted the number of times that words like "multiculturalism" and "diversity" were used and then compared that count with the number of times that the word "math" or a variant thereof was used. They found that the average multiculturalism-to-math ratio was 1.82, meaning that education schools are offering almost two "social goals" courses for every course on math or math pedagogy. At the most egregious end of the spectrum is UCLA, which offers sixteen social goals courses for every math course. At the other end of the spectrum is Penn State, with 2.5 math courses for every social goals course.

Requisite multicultural training may be well intentioned—it's just that the sort of awareness that such training hopes to instill is not exactly teachable. An exhaustive review by the American Educational Research Association (AERA) concluded that these obligatory courses do little to change anyone's attitudes, a finding that was more broadly confirmed by a recent study of diversity training in the private sector.

Source: www.nctq.org

Free Sourcebook

The publisher of *Education Week* has launched an exclusive new resource guide on teacher professional development. The inaugural issue of the *Teacher Professional Development Sourcebook*, focusing on the expanding role of teacher collaborative work, is available online now. It includes:

- Best practices and advice on creating and maintaining professional learning teams
- Research on what works in professional development
- Data snapshots of current practices and state requirements in teacher professional development

Visit www.teachermagazine.org for more information on this free publication.

The Greening of NCLB?

Guess why U.S. schoolchildren are said not to know enough about global warming? As with everything else that may or may not be wrong with young Americans, just blame NCLB.

So says the North American Association for Environmental Education's recent study, *Environmental Literacy in America*. It asserts that, because of No Child Left Behind, the amount of environmental education in schools has "leveled off and may even be in decline for the first time in three decades." But fret not. Congress is allegedly considering legislation to include in a reauthorized NCLB greater

emphasis on environmental education and more funding for it. Is environmental awareness really in decline in America's classrooms? Why does environmental education

need to be enshrined in a massive federal law? Schools should teach science; ecology is part of science; and the environment is part of ecology. Teachers don't need more mandates heaped upon them, especially those motivated by actors and activists swooning over the latest Hollywood docudrama. What's next, federally funded Ethanol Awareness Week for 7-year-olds?

Source: "Greener Lessons Needed," *Associated Press*

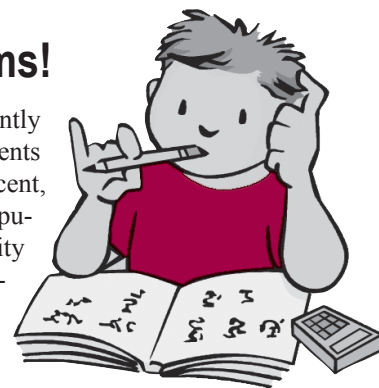


Dallas has Problems!

Dallas teachers are currently barred from giving their students any grade lower than a 50 percent, "Please, let us bestow upon our pupils the grades that they in reality earn," say the teachers. Superintendent Michael Hinojosa scoffs at such pleas. He thinks if students do nothing early in a semester and receive zeros, they'll be unable to affect an academic turnaround later in the marking period. However, if youngsters who complete no assignments nonetheless receive 50 percent credit for them, they can—if lightning strikes—still pull out a passing grade later in the semester.

Such tortured logic, realized through the Dallas school code, magically accomplishes at least three undesirable goals. First, it shows students (and teachers) that their school grades are wholly fabricated. There was a time when grades meant at least something; they do no longer. Second, it lets teachers know that they have no autonomy in their classrooms, even in grading. And third, it mocks those who push for higher standards and more accountability, and it makes hypocrites of Dallas's school administrators.

"Dallas teachers ask for ability to give grades below 50," by Kent Fischer, *Dallas Morning News*, January 18, 2008





Money for Grades



The idea of paying students for good grades is gaining more traction across the nation as school districts in twelve states have adopted the idea. Examples of some of the plans that schools have implemented include:

- Baltimore schools have promised to allocate more than \$935,000 to give to high school students as much as \$110 each to improve their scores on state graduation exams.
- In New York City, about 9,000 fourth- and seventh-graders in 60 schools are eligible to receive up to \$500 for improvements on the city's English and math tests.
- In Atlanta two schools have implemented a "Learn & Earn" after-school program. Students participating in the program will earn \$8 an hour for the 15-week class.

Seven other states—Arkansas, Alabama, Connecticut, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Virginia, and Washington—are participating in an Exxon/Mobil program that pays students \$100 for each passing grade on advanced placement college-prep exams.

The idea of paying students for grades draws strong opinions from opponents and proponents alike. According to Gregg Fleisher of the National Math and Science Initiative, the idea of students receiving cash for improved grades is "an incentive to get them to basically make the right decision and choose a more rigorous class. This teaches them that if they work at something very hard and have a lot of support, they can do something they didn't think they could do." Not everyone ascribes to this idea, however. Bob Schaeffer of the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, a watchdog group, states, "Bribing kids for higher test scores—or paying teachers bounties for

their students' work—is similar to giving them steroids. Short-term performance might improve but the long-term effects can be very damaging."

Source: "Good grades pay off—literally," by Greg Toppo, USA Today, January 27, 2008

Federal School Construction Mandates Drive Up Costs



Efforts to impose federal requirements on state and local school construction projects will impose costly mandates and threaten the autonomy and responsibility traditionally maintained at the state and local level, warned witnesses who testified last month before the U.S. House Education and Labor Committee.

"The responsibility for maintaining those facilities lies with the local communities who know their students' needs best" said the committee's Senior Republican, Rep. Howard P. "Buck" McKeon (R-CA).

The committee also heard testimony on the specific challenges that would come from federal school construction requirements, including the impact of Davis-Bacon prevailing wage mandates that drive up the cost of federal construction projects. Another committee member, Rep. Charles Boustany (R-LA), warned "Either taxpayers get overcharged by the system, or construction employees are underpaid. We wouldn't teach that kind of fuzzy math in school buildings; we shouldn't practice it when building schools."

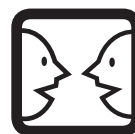
Jim Waters, Director of Policy and Communications for the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions, discussed the impact of prevailing wage requirements on school construction projects in the state of Kentucky.

"The 'prevailing wage' law provides an example of a well-intentioned policy gone awry. The law prevents state government from receiving the most value for every

dollar spent on public projects. Forcing government to pay union-like wages drives up the cost of roads, school buildings, and infrastructure systems by 10 to 15 percent," said Waters.

The committee also heard from Neal McCluskey, Associate Director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the CATO Institute. "[The] problem with top-down control is that large organizations invariably have big bureaucracies, and big bureaucracies invariably make action inefficient and slow," explained McCluskey. "In a system of choice with autonomous schools, in contrast, schools can respond very quickly to their needs, not having to perpetually fill out extensive paperwork to get work approvals, supplies, and maintenance personnel from huge, distant home offices. School choice—letting markets work—is the key to getting good, safe school buildings, just as it is the key to academic success."

USDOE Offers Teaching Ambassador Fellowship



The U.S. Department of Education recently announced the creation of Teaching Ambassador Fellowship (TAF) positions at the U.S. Department of Education, which will offer highly motivated, innovative public school teachers the opportunity to contribute their knowledge and experience to the national dialogue on public education.

Up to twenty Classroom Fellows will be chosen, who remain at their local schools under their regular teaching contracts, and will provide their experience and perspectives to the Department.

Applications are due by April 7, 2008. For more information, visit www.ed.gov/programs/teacherfellowship.



Read AAE press releases at www.aeteachers.org. Click on "press room."

Cyber Schools

The Benefits of a Virtual Education

By Jonathan Horowitz, Ed.D.

Virtual schools started appearing in the late 1990s and are currently available in several states across the country—including California. According to “A National Primer on K-12 Online Learning from the North American Council for Online Learning” (April 2007), at the end of 2006, twenty-five states offered state-led online learning programs, and eighteen states were home to 147 virtual charter schools serving over 65,000 students.

Yet, despite the steady growth in interest and enrollment, many people don’t understand how virtual schools work or the numerous benefits they provide—to both students and our education system.

Virtual learning enables school districts to deliver a flexible educational option via the Internet and allows educators to address the specific gifts or challenges of the individual student. Virtual students have notable educational support as they learn from home with parents or caregivers while working with teachers over the Web. Virtual schools typically provide a print-rich curriculum that combines textbooks and hands-on materials with technology tools.

Benefits

The benefits of virtual education come in many forms. For the student, “wearing your pajamas to class” may be one of them, but it’s far from the defining characteristic. Above all, students are offered high-quality, highly accountable, individualized learning. Teachers, parents, and students work together to plan the educational path that is right for the student. Does the student require additional work in algebra? Are they interested in learning Chinese? Do they want to focus on one subject for several days? These are the types of questions and options virtual learning affords. With virtual learning, the actual school work and education is the main focus, while the time and place it gets done is secondary.

As a result, virtual schools attract all types of students, resulting in a diverse and unique student body. A typical virtual class may include students who are far ahead of their peers in a tradi-



tional setting, as well as those who are behind or require additional assistance in certain areas. Or, students who need a rigorous, yet flexible learning schedule to accommodate a sports or acting career. It also brings together students from different towns. Yet these students are learning together, from each other, and sharing on many levels.

Social Implications?

While many parents worry about the social implications of having their children enrolled in a virtual school, many schools take this into account and make it easy for the kids to interact with their peers. Some virtual schools provide planned field trips where students can interact with one another in person, and online bulletin boards where kids can talk about the latest Harry Potter movie or meet a new friend with similar interests from another state.

The dedication to a child’s education is also paramount to succeeding in a virtual learning environment. Parents or caregivers directly contribute to and participate in the student’s day-to-day education process while lessons can be delivered when and where it works best for both. For example, Carissa Lim is currently enrolled in a virtual school program and is taught by her mother, Nancy Lim. Carissa is also a gymnast who spends a great deal of time practicing and competing in her sport—a traditional school schedule and environment were challenging and did not support her lifestyle. The virtual learning model offers families like the Lims an alternative to public school education with a flexible schedule while still providing an enriched and challenging curriculum.

“My daughter needs an outlet for her athletic passion and personality and she just wasn’t happy in a traditional public school,” said Nancy Lim. “Virtual learning allows us to advance in subjects she is interested in and allows her to pursue gymnastics at the same time—I couldn’t ask for a better arrangement.”

Parents of students in virtual schools consistently give high remarks on their children’s education. For families who find that traditional schools are not providing the individualized attention they want, virtual schools continue to provide a highly effective and successful alternative. ■

Jonathan Horowitz, Ed.D., currently serves as principal of Capistrano Connections Academy and oversees Central California Connections Academy. Horowitz has more than 25 years of experience in education in California.



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