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Algebra for All 8th Graders: Leaders Choose Sides

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger apparently tipped the scales after months of battle over whether the state's algebra test should become an 8th grade requirement within three years. It will, as a result of a **vote** on Wednesday, July 11, by the state Board of Education.

Schwarzenegger weighed in less than 24 hours before the key vote, which angered opponents of the move, who lacked much time to respond.

Civic leaders and educators on both sides of the debate have weighed in.

-- Howard Blume

The governor's staff was first to sum up commentary supporting the new requirement. Here's the release: [The release has been edited to remove redundancy and comments that were made prior to the day of the state board's vote]:

What They're Saying... About The Governor's Support Of Algebra I In 8th Grade Algebra I Test Recognized As An "Essential" Element To California's Education Achievements

Tulare County Board Chairman Connie Conway: "Math proficiency is an essential skill for success. California needs to make every effort to prepare our youth for their role as future leaders. Preparing eighth graders for algebra coincides with the high standards the state began implementing in the late 1990s."

President And Chief Executive Officer Of BayBio Matthew M. Gardner: "Algebra is the gateway to critical thinking, pivotal for success in science, engineering and technology."

California Council On Science And Technology Executive Director Susan Hackwood: "The state has been moving towards a goal of preparing every eighth grade student in algebra for some time. Acknowledging that this is the standard to which California's students should be held is the right thing to do."

California Council On Science And Technology Board Chair Karl Pister: "Making algebra the standard for eighth grade students was a strong step towards enhancing the rigor of our school standards."

Kern County Superintendent Of Schools Larry E. Reider: "More students today are taking algebra before they enter high school. Some learn it quickly. Others struggle to master it. Having our students prepared to take and pass the Algebra I test by the time they complete the 8th grade is a worthwhile goal. We must continue to set the highest possible standards for our students."

EdVoice Founder Reed Hastings: "As a former math teacher and now CEO of Netflix, I know that children who learn Algebra I early have a real advantage and we want all California children to get that same advantage. Governor Schwarzenegger has shown courage with his leadership on this issue."

EdVoice Board Co-Chair Eli Broad: "When faced with a fork in the road, the governor was willing to take the bold step on the path less traveled and lead the state and the nation to a new era of higher math achievement for all students, not just a select few. When people look back and consider the efforts that returned California to its rightful place as a leader in the nation and the world, they will say, 'and that made all the difference.'"

California Business Roundtable President Bill Hauck: "One of the paramount goals of the business community is to return California schools to a position of national prominence. The request our governor made today of the State Board of Education is the right message at the right time for the right reasons. California's business leaders know that a successful public education system based upon high standards and expectations is not only in the best interest of students, parents and teachers, but also important to a strong and vibrant economy."

Former State Board Of Education President Yvonne Larson: "I applaud the Governor's leadership in directing the Board to ensure California's public schools prepare all children for success in Algebra I by the end of grade eight."

Edison International Chairman And Chief Executive Officer John E. Bryson: "As a major California employer, SCE understands and appreciates the importance of a well-trained and educated workforce. Governor Schwarzenegger's call for higher educational standards is to be commended."

California State University Chancellor Charles B. Reed: "In today's economy, going to college is more important than ever. A college degree is a ticket to a better job and a better future. It can improve the economic situation of both individuals and their communities. A college graduate's lifetime earnings are almost double those of a high school graduate. This is why the California State University has made a priority of reaching out to K-12 schools and traditionally underserved communities around our state. We want to make sure that more students are prepared to enter college and prepared to succeed once they get to college. Proficiency in Algebra I and II has been demonstrated as the surest pathway to higher achievement as well as success in college."

California Community Colleges Chancellor Diane Woodruff: "Overwhelming research has shown that Algebra is the gateway skill to success in both the workforce and in college. For this reason, we strongly support the goal of having all students take Algebra I in the 8th grade. We know that this high standard will require an intense commitment and increased investment in the resources for schools and staff development for K-12 teachers. I agree with the Governor that when we set our goals high, we have a greater likelihood of meeting the goal and substantially improving the quality of education for all students."

South Bay Association Of Chambers Of Commerce Chair Helen Duncan: "The South Bay Association of Chambers of Commerce supports Governor Schwarzenegger in maintaining high mathematic standards by making Algebra I a standard requirement for all 8th Graders. Our major industries, such as the aerospace employers in the South Bay, have always believed in hiring local people for skilled manufacturing jobs. But they eventually have to recruit people from outside the community due to the lack of people that have adequate arithmetic and science skills necessary for employment in a highly specialized sector. By elevating our skills for the next generation, we increase job opportunities for our local community which benefits the economy of the State of California."

Fresno Deputy Mayor Jeff Eben: "As a longtime high school educator, I am pleased to support the Governor and his efforts to increase the accountability in Algebra I. To successfully graduate from high school with every opportunity available, it is critical that students have completed Algebra I before their freshman year. By setting the bar high and increasing the accountability, we can expect student achievement to increase. I urge the State Board of Education to support the single standardized Algebra I test as recommended by Governor Schwarzenegger."

State Supt. of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell and the California Dept. of Education opposed the new requirement, insisting it was a misstep in the effort to uphold high standards and improve student learning. O'Connell's staff also gathered reaction. Here is that release:

(Note: This release touts the inclusion of educators, although Schwarzenegger's allies also included some educators.)

What Educators Are Saying...About The Governor's Proposal for Algebra I In 8th Grade Algebra I Requirement for 8th Graders Just Doesn't Work Say Educators

Just today, Governor Schwarzenegger's office released a document entitled, "What They're Saying...About the Governor's Support of Algebra I in 8th Grade." We noted a glaring omission among the responders. There was a lack of input from teachers, principals, or district leaders. Therefore, we wanted to supplement the Governor's document with what educators are saying. Steven Weinberg, Instructional Facilitator, Frick Middle School: "More than half of our students come to us in the sixth grade Below Basic or Far Below Basic in Math. Very few of those students are prepared to succeed in Algebra I at the eighth grade level. So being forced to place all students in that class, without regard to their level of preparation, would lead to an increase in the number of students who both fail eighth grade Algebra I and are not ready to succeed in Algebra I in the ninth grade either."

Kathy Woods, President, California Mathematics Council: "It is intellectually dishonest for the state to ask students to be tested on academic content that they have not studied. The proposed mandate runs counter to all principles of sound policy in education."

Christopher J. Steinhauser, Long Beach Unified School District Superintendent: "Experience has told us that not all students are ready to take Algebra at the same time, and a one-size-fits-all approach unfairly punishes students, often those who need our help the most."

Kip Meyer, Assistant Superintendent for Personnel Services, Lake Elsinore Unified School District: "Algebra I is the toughest course on a middle school campus. While many students succeed at Algebra I during their 7th and 8th grade school years, this is not the case for all students. Just as we differentiate learning, in general, for all students, we should do the same for Algebra I."

Jeanie Cash, Assistant Superintendent, Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified School District: "It is an unrealistic expectation that ALL be successful as 8th grade algebra students."

Dale Lofgren, Director of Pupil Services, El Segundo Unified School District: "It is not a matter of the quality of instruction, or school's giving in to low standards, or lack of accountability of teachers, schools and the instruction by former grade levels, because some 8th grade students are just not developmentally ready to learn Algebra I. Anyone who doubts this just needs to teach an 8th algebra class to the struggling math students for a day or two."

John Pendley, Superintendent, Columbia Unified School District: "Some students are ready for Algebra 1 by eighth grade, but my experience is only about 5-10% of the students truly are ready and they struggle a little as well. We can still accommodate that placement without punishing the rest of the students (and the schools)."

Jeff Hearn, Superintendent, Santa Maria Joint Union High School District: "Developmentally, many students are not ready to successfully take on the Algebra I curriculum."

Dan Fendel, Professor of Mathematics (emeritus), San Francisco State University: "At the present time, many thousands of students are already enrolled prematurely in Algebra I and the failure rate is horrendous. The Governor's plan would make this situation even worse."

Janet Knoeppel, Retired Principal, Argus High School: "There are far too many young people who are not mature enough to grasp the abstract concepts in Algebra I as 8th graders. To require them to take a course that may set them up for failure does these youngsters no good and makes both our teachers and our state look like they are failing our students."

Stephen McCahon, math teacher, Pioneer High School: "There's a big void at the middle-school level. We have a lot of students who take Algebra I in the eighth grade, and then they repeat it in ninth grade. A lot of students aren't ready for that level of math."

Chuck Weis, Santa Clara County Schools Chief: "You need to lay the groundwork if you're going to make this kind of policy shift. We need to invest in the teaching of mathematics at the lower grade levels."

Posted by Howard Blume on July 11, 2008 in [Education](#) , [Schools](#) , [Students](#) | [Permalink](#)