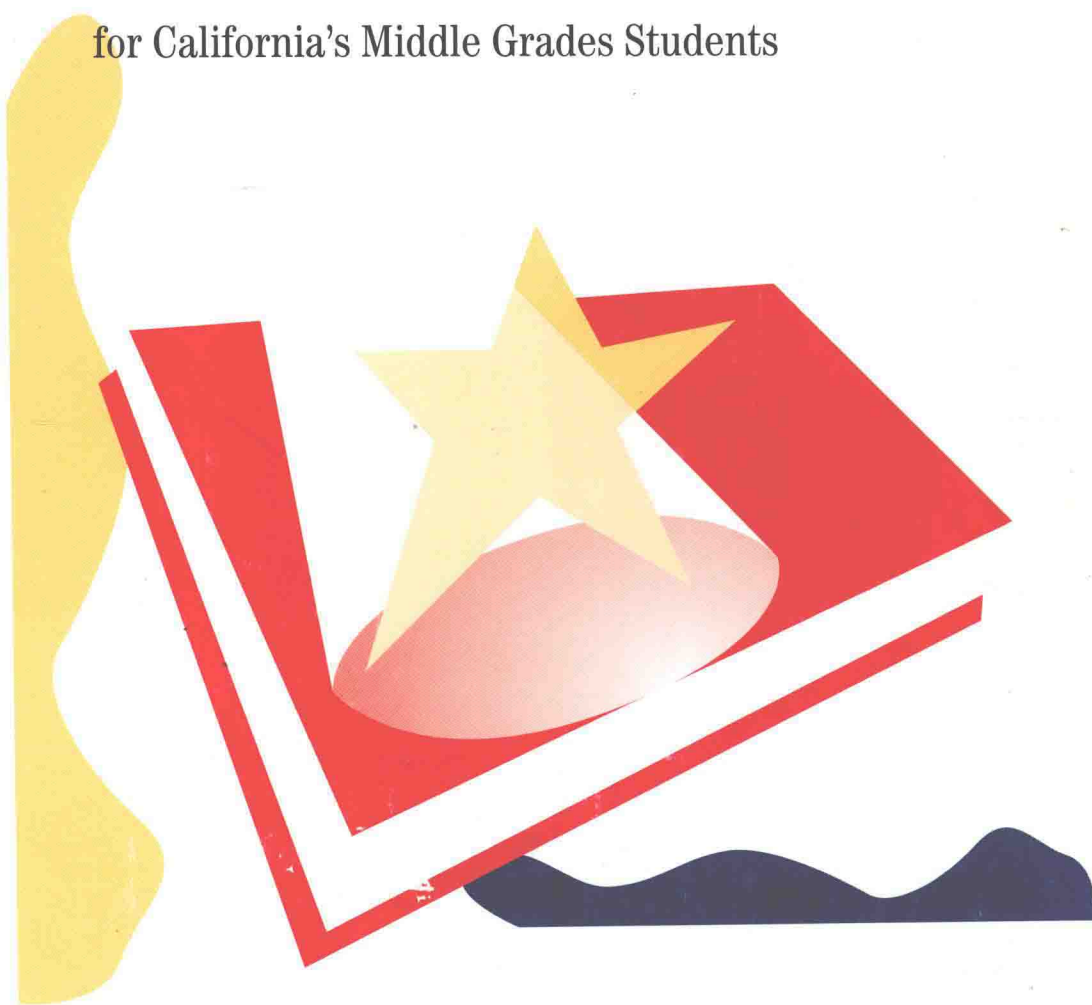




Taking Center Stage

A Commitment to Standards-Based Education
for California's Middle Grades Students



California Department of Education • Sacramento, 2001

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A partial list of other educational resources available from the Department appears on page 271. In addition, an illustrated *Educational Resources Catalog* describing publications, videos, and other instructional media available from the Department can be obtained without charge by writing to the address given above or by calling the Sales Office at (916) 445-1260.
Notice

The guidance in *Taking Center Stage* is not binding on local educational agencies or other entities. Except for the statutes, regulations, and court decisions that are referenced herein, the document is exemplary, and compliance with it is not mandatory. (See *Education Code* Section 33308.5.)

Message from the State Superintendent of Public Instruction

They are not our youngest students. They are not our oldest students. They are those students who are in the center—our *middle grades students*. They are also those students who are often living through the most confusing, uncertain times of their lives.

This handbook, *Taking Center Stage: A Commitment of Standards-Based Education for California's Middle Grades Students*, looks at the needs of middle grades students against a backdrop of standards, assessment, and accountability. It provides guidance for California's educators to help them successfully implement a standards-based education for our young adolescents.

Clearly, students are facing a challenging period in their development. As a result, those educators who have been charged with the important task of educating these students have an *equally* challenging task. It is a time of ups and downs, successes and setbacks, and bold exploration juxtaposed against anxieties and insecurities. In fact, the adolescent years can be so tumultuous that some of us—when we reflect back on our own experiences—are enormously thankful that we do not need to relive those years.

To guide us in our efforts to provide a world-class education for these students, I established the Middle Grades Task Force,

and I want to thank the educators who served on this group. I greatly appreciate all their hard work and the many hours they spent on this project. Their charge was to build upon the earlier work of *Caught in the Middle*, the 1987 California Department of Education middle grades report. Moving forward from that previous document, *Taking Center Stage* specifically addresses how to implement standards and to explore their implications for the school as a whole.

The middle grades have always been a critical and pivotal link for students in the education chain. This linkage takes on an even greater significance with the *High School Exit Examination* looming in the future of every middle grades student. Our middle school educators are vital to the standards-based learning that will prepare students for the future.

I hope you find this document a useful tool, and I look forward to working with you as we continue building a world-class, standards-based education in California for *all* students.



DELAINE EASTIN
State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Preface

Taking Center Stage: A Commitment to Standards-Based Education for California's Middle Grades Students has been written primarily for teachers and principals, most of whom consider implementing standards-based education one of their most compelling professional challenges. Examining standards-based education from several perspectives, the document focuses on what some observers refer to as the technology of standards: What are they? How do we work toward meeting them? How do we measure them? What do we do with the results?

This publication contains helpful information for school personnel about what they need to know and do to make standards-based education a success. Accordingly, it examines such issues as school culture, classroom organization, differentiated instruction, accelerated learning opportunities, an emotionally and physically safe school environment, and the specific knowledge and skills teachers and principals need to work effectively in a standards-based middle school.

Each chapter concludes with thought-provoking professional reflections, intended to challenge teachers and principals to think deeply about the issues presented, and one or more appendixes containing material related to

the chapter. Notes and additional references are provided at the back of the publication.

Analytical, reflective, and informative, *Taking Center Stage* avoids the danger of assuming that everyone understands or is committed to standards-based education in the same way. The reader is provided with a substantial amount of information, together with the logic behind standards, assessment, and accountability for unleashing greater levels of professional commitment to reforms in standards-based education.

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Acknowledgments

The California Department of Education extends special appreciation to the Middle Grades Task Force, the authors of *Taking Center Stage: A Commitment to Standards-Based Education for California's Middle Grades Students*, and numerous individuals in the Department who collaborated on this publication. Their combined efforts have resulted in a practical, grade-span document for middle grades educators that emphasizes the importance of a student-centered, middle grades philosophy as a strong and compatible foundation for standards-based education in California.

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Appreciation is extended to James Fenwick for interrupting his retirement and being the driving force behind the development of this publication. Mr. Fenwick's expertise, integrity, and uncommon commitment to middle grades education are reflected throughout the book.

During the development of this publication, the educational landscape in California changed drastically. The system of standards, assessment, and accountability matured and became

technically more complex. In addition, new California initiatives directly affecting middle grades schools outpaced the document's currency.

The Department also extends appreciation to Rozlynn Worrall and Diane Levin, who put forth an extraordinary effort to update the document. Their collective expertise and background as middle grades educators, writers, and consultants in standards, assessment, and accountability are reflected in the initial chapters of this book.

California Department of Education Staff

Thanks are also due to the following consultants in the Middle Grades and High School Networks Office who contributed to the development of this document:

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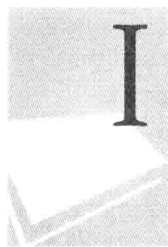
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Introduction

Report from the Superintendent's Middle Grades Task Force



In September 1998 State Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin convened the Middle Grades Task Force to develop a grade-span sequel to the 1987 publication *Caught in the Middle: Educational Reform for Young Adolescents in California Public Schools*. Superintendent Eastin also asked the task force to move beyond that earlier work and to focus on standards, assessment, and accountability and their implications for middle school instruction.

Shortly after, on January 18, 1999, the State Board of Education and Superintendent Eastin issued a joint public statement defining policy and administrative commitments to standards-based education:

A shortcoming of [school reform] up to this point has been the lack of focus on rigorous academic standards. The desire to improve student achievement . . . lacked a comprehensive, specific vision of what students actually needed to know and be able to do. . . . For the first time we are stating explicitly the content that students need to acquire at each grade level through grade eight and in grades nine and ten and in grades eleven and twelve. These standards are rigorous. With student mastery of this content, California schools will be on a par with those in the best educational systems in

other states and nations. . . . Fifteen years from now, we are convinced, the adoption of standards will be viewed as the signal event that began "a rising tide of excellence" in our schools. No more will the critical question "What should my child be learning?" be met with uncertainty of knowledge, purpose, and resolve. These standards answer the question. They are comprehensive and specific. They represent our commitment to excellence.

The report of the findings and recommendations of the Middle Grades Task Force affirms the relationship between a sound middle school philosophy and the goals of standards-based education.

The task force approached this work with the utmost seriousness. *Taking Center Stage* outlines the conditions for implementing standards-based middle grades education, including specific recommendations on such issues as the following:

- Professional accountability
- Reports of standards-based performance to students and parents
- Creation of a school culture capable of sustaining standards-based education
- Effective use of time through the scheduling of strategies that emphasize deep learning, complex reasoning, and differentiated instruction

- After-hours programs designed to support academic learning in response to content and performance standards
- Site-based professional development designed to provide teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to work effectively in a standards-based middle school

Taking Center Stage includes more than two hundred references, including the work of major scholars and middle-level educators.

Throughout its work the Middle Grades Task Force has been driven by an intense desire to develop a document and recommendations that:

- Reflect the philosophy and policy of the State Board of Education and State Superintendent Eastin.

- Support and build on the student-centered middle school philosophy for young adolescents.
- Speak directly to the needs of teachers and principals as they incorporate new knowledge and skills into their day-to-day professional practices.
- Guide instructional and assessment practices designed to help all students meet or exceed defined academic proficiency levels.

The Middle Grades Task Force and the California Department of Education have identified key elements *and* recommendations needed to implement standards-based education and support student academic achievement. The seven key elements and the 16 recommendations are as follows:

Key Elements and Recommendations



Key Element I Rigorous Academic Content and Performance Standards

To ensure the success of all students:

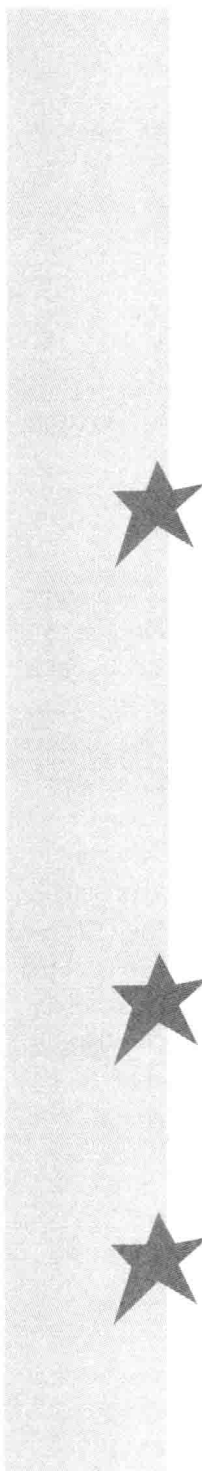
- Recommendation 1: Implement rigorous and consistent standards while maintaining a dynamic student-centered culture. (See Chapters 1, 2, 5, and 10.)
- Recommendation 2: Provide sustaining resources and support for standards-based education. (See Chapters 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, and 12.)



Key Element II Curriculum and Instruction

To ensure the success of all students:

- Recommendation 3: Demonstrate commitment to essential elements of the middle grades philosophy. (See Chapters 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 12.)
- Recommendation 4: Align curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices with the California content and performance standards. (See Chapters 2, 3, and 14.)

- 
- Recommendation 5: Connect the contributions of California's diverse multicultural population as standards are implemented. (See Chapters 6, 10, 12, and 14.)
- Recommendation 6: Use technology as a tool to improve and increase student academic achievement. (See Chapters 6 and 14.)
- Recommendation 7: Examine the use of time to provide students and teachers opportunities to plan, integrate, teach, and learn. (See Chapters 7, 9, and 11.)
- Recommendation 8: Work with feeder elementary schools and destination high schools to provide consistent expectations and seamless transitions. (See Chapters 2, 4, 11, and 13.)

Key Element III Assessment and Accountability

To ensure the success of all students:

- Recommendation 9: Relate performance standards to content standards to define levels of academic excellence and proficiency. (See Chapters 2, 3, and 4.)
- Recommendation 10: Develop classroom and local assessment data systems that are used to determine appropriate instructional practices. (See Chapters 3, 4, and 8.)
- Recommendation 11: Hold all stakeholders accountable for high academic and behavioral expectations. (See Chapters 1, 2, 4, and 11.)

Key Element IV Student Interventions

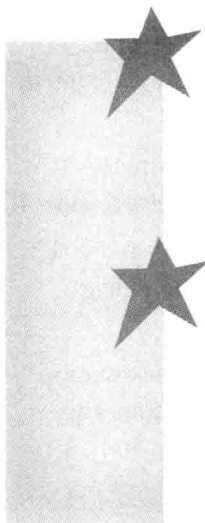
To ensure the success of all students:

- Recommendation 12: Provide appropriate accelerated interventions based on the results of relevant assessment instruments. (See Chapters 3, 10, 11, 12, and 14.)

Key Element V Professional Development

To ensure the success of all students:

- Recommendation 13: Provide relevant and appropriate school-based, comprehensive, ongoing professional development. (See Chapters 7 and 14.)



Key Element VI Parent and Community Partnerships

To ensure the success of all students:

Recommendation 14: Engage families and the community to support student achievement. (See Chapters 9, 12, and 13.)

Key Element VII Health and Safety

To ensure the success of all students:

Recommendation 15: Create and sustain safe school environments. (See Chapters 6, 8, 12, and 13.)

Recommendation 16: Provide access to health and social services to maximize student well-being. (See Chapter 13.)

As middle schools have evolved and grown in number and research continues to validate the unique and vital role that middle schools play in the development of young adolescents, the next major advance—standards-based middle grades education—will challenge every middle-level educator in California. Standards-based education in the middle grades is the dominant theme around which this document is organized. Many observers of the middle school movement believe that it is now possible to implement a powerful model for schooling young adolescents in the middle grades and to make the educational experience even more dynamic and effective. A passion on the part of

teachers, principals, and parents for academic excellence as well as a deep commitment to opportunities for engaging young adolescents during their formative stages of development will count most in preparing them for successful productive citizenship in the new millennium.

The seven key elements frame for the reader the meaning and importance of standards-based middle grades education. Throughout the document the recommendations of the Superintendent's Middle Grades Task Force are noted with a star and band of blue on the first page of every chapter. These notations will assist in locating material specific to each recommendation.

*"A total commitment is paramount to reaching
the ultimate in performance."*

—Tom Flores

California's Middle Schools: Poised for World-Class Performance

In any performance all eyes are fixed on center stage. When the players take center stage, they enter the spotlight—the focal point where the foremost action takes place. With expectation the audience watches.

Education is always in the spotlight because of its unquestionable value to a literate and responsible citizenry. At center stage in the continuum of grade spans are the middle grades, a pivotal period between elementary school and high school. Within the middle grades a number of key constructs share the spotlight:

- ***Standards-based education takes center stage.*** Both content and performance standards are central to the shift from a curriculum-based paradigm to one highlighting standards.
- ***Assessment takes center stage.*** Meaningful student assessments are central to effective instruction. From assessment results,

teachers determine what needs to be taught and, perhaps, what needs to be taught again. A variety of assessment tools are used: statewide and local, formal and informal. Standards-aligned assessments are essential in determining whether students have achieved standards.

- ***Accountability takes center stage.*** Teachers, administrators, students, and parents are all essential stakeholders and partners responsible for student success.

A student-centered philosophy occupies the stage in the middle grades. It provides a rich setting and context for initiatives that lead to higher levels of student achievement for all students. *Taking Center Stage* addresses each of the fundamental components within a context relevant to California's middle schools, a central grade span well poised for world-class performance. But first a historical perspective of middle grades philosophy as well as the key events and initiatives leading to standards-based education in California must be provided.



Recommendations 1, 3, 11

Tom Flores, former National Football League coach

Historical Perspective: Setting the Stage for California's Middle School Reform Movement

Those who were engaged in middle-level education during the latter half of the twentieth century are familiar with the debate over the most appropriate kind of schooling to be provided for young adolescents. During that period deep concerns developed over the failure of many junior high schools to respond adequately to the unique developmental characteristics of middle-level students. The typically rigid organization of junior high schools, which mimicked the departmentalized structure of secondary education, rendered young adolescents unprepared for the transition from the emotionally safe haven of elementary schools to the demands of the junior high schools.

Two things became increasingly clear. First, students in grades six, seven, and eight required schools that would focus on the students' physical, social, and emotional development. Second, they needed schools that would respond effectively to the students' rapidly developing intellectual abilities. Unfortunately, the staffs in many junior high schools in California were ill prepared by training or inclination to take on that dual requirement. Nor were conventional elementary schools, kindergarten through grade eight, prepared to alter their self-contained classroom structures to provide for a more rigorous academic emphasis, particularly in mathematics and science, even though their nurturing student-centered focus was laudable. In short, young adolescents found themselves caught in the middle.

Concerns about meeting the needs of those students led to the publication in 1987 of *Caught in the Middle: Educational Reform for Young Adolescents in California Public Schools*,¹ which captured the essence of a new kind of school for young adolescents. Before its publication many California educators and parents saw the middle school years as a period of time to be endured rather than celebrated. But much of that mentality has disappeared with the advent of middle schools. Because of concerted efforts by middle school principals to hire teachers who embrace this more positive philosophy, a much higher number of those teaching in middle grades schools today do so by choice, not by chance. Teachers with specialized training in core subjects are attracted to middle schools that emphasize high academic standards. At the same time, school administrators have been successfully recruiting teachers with serious interest in the promise rather than the problems of early adolescence.

Early adolescence is one of the most exciting periods of intellectual, physical, social, and emotional development in the human life span. To energize the education of the state's young adolescents, hundreds of new middle schools have emerged throughout California during the past decade. The resulting changes that have occurred in middle-level education constitute one of California's most successful educational reform efforts.

Combining demands for academic proficiency and enlightened responsiveness to the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual challenges of students in the middle grades, teachers and principals have created middle schools in which students are no longer caught in the middle. Their efforts, together with those

of approximately 500 middle grades partnership schools in the California Middle Grades Partnership Network, have produced dynamic new learning environments (see also Appendix 1-A, “California Middle Grades Partnership Network,” at the end of this chapter).

A research-based report funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century*,² documents the progress made by middle schools in the last decade. The first *Turning Points* report and recommendations, published in 1989,³ called on middle schools to “transmit a core of common, substantial knowledge to all students in ways that foster curiosity, problem solving, and critical thinking.” *Turning Points 2000* reshapes and adds precision to that recommendation and the others, having based the new recommendations on practices found to be effective.

The new recommendations call for “middle grades schools that:⁴

- Teach a curriculum grounded in rigorous public academic standards for what students should know and be able to do relevant to the concerns of adolescents and based on how students learn best. . . .
- Use instructional methods designed to prepare all students to achieve higher standards and become lifelong learners. . . .
- Staff middle grades schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents and engage teachers in ongoing, targeted professional development opportunities. . . .
- Organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose. . . .

- Govern democratically, through direct or representative participation by all school staff members, the adults who know the students best. . . .
- Provide a safe and healthy school environment as part of improving academic performance and developing caring and ethical citizens. . . .
- Involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development. . . .”

The *Turning Points 2000* recommendations are consistent with those of California’s Middle Grades Task Force (see Introduction). California’s Middle Grades Task Force’s recommendations reflect the best of middle grades philosophy (including equal access to the most demanding curricula, interdisciplinary team teaching, active and cooperative learning, flexible scheduling, inclusive classrooms, multicultural education, complex reasoning, and differentiated instruction, along with mentoring, tutoring, and counseling experiences) and an increased emphasis on academic expectations through standards-based education. The task force’s recommendations relevant to the content in each chapter are highlighted on the first page of each chapter.

A Shift in California’s Educational Paradigm

For a better understanding of the rationale behind California’s shift to a standards-based system, it is important to take a look back at some of the milestones of the past decade. What took place in the 1990s to warrant a change in the delivery system for education?

What events precipitated the call for standards-based education?

In 1991 the U.S. Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) in *What Work Requires of Schools*⁵ called for schools to produce students better prepared to transition to a workplace environment significantly changed from an industrial model to a knowledge-based, technology model. The emerging jobs and workplace were calling for employees with sophisticated critical thinking and higher-reasoning skills as well as basic skills in reading, writing, mathematics, speaking, and listening. The SCANS report also emphasized the importance of interpersonal skills and the ability of incoming employees to work on teams and with people from culturally diverse backgrounds. The expected workplace and foundation competencies were to begin in kindergarten and grow throughout a student's educational career (see also Appendix 1-B, "SCANS Workplace Know-How," at the end of this chapter).

The American-based New Standards Project⁶ began in 1993 to collect and analyze standardized tests and documents from other countries whose students were performing well on international tests and whose highly skilled citizens tended to hold jobs that paid well. A major finding of this analysis—of prevailing significance—is that schools are successful when they set clear, consistent, demanding standards that make sense in the culture of the local school community and the nation. Use of performance assessments to determine academic proficiency in relation to standards is also a common feature of successful schools.

A major factor sounding an alarm for California to reevaluate its instructional and curricular practices was the showing of its

students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In the mid-1990s, the results of NAEP tests in reading and mathematics revealed that California's students ranked near the bottom when compared with students from other participating states. Additionally, the results of statewide assessments in California indicated that, collectively, the state's students were not demonstrating high levels of academic achievement.

California also needed to develop a plan to respond to its socioeconomic and culturally diverse population, ensuring access to rigorous standards for all of its students. Forty-eight percent of California's children live near or below the poverty line, the majority of California's children are minorities, and one in every four California students (1.4 million) speaks little or no English.⁷ Significant changes would have to take place to close the achievement gap and prepare California's children for the knowledge-based technological economy that awaited them.

In the spring of 1995, one of the first acts of newly elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin was to convene a Reading Task Force and a Mathematics Task Force. The purpose of the task forces was to (1) determine some of the potential causes for the less-than-satisfactory assessment results; and (2) make specific recommendations that would collectively serve to raise achievement levels.

Reading

The efforts of the Reading Task Force culminated with the report titled *Every Child a Reader*.⁸ Published in 1995, the document was pivotal in promoting "balanced and comprehensive" language arts instruction. The report

also touted multiple solutions to the very complex challenge of improving reading achievement, among which were the following:

- A new language arts framework to articulate fully the notion of “balanced and comprehensive” instruction
- The establishment of academic content standards in the language arts (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) for every grade level, kindergarten through grade twelve
- An assessment system aligned with standards
- Intensive professional development at the in-service and preservice levels
- A high-quality preschool experience to be available to all children
- Appropriate instructional materials (textbooks)
- Class-size reduction minimizing the student/teacher ratio to promote more effective classroom instruction
- Intervention strategies to prevent reading deficiencies before they become too great to overcome
- Prioritization of reading instruction at every school site
- Increased funding and resources to promote the recommendations

Mathematics

In 1995 the Mathematics Task Force published its own report titled *Improving Mathematics Achievement for All California Students*.⁹ Like the Reading Task Force’s report, the mathematics document included a variety of recommendations designed to advance mathematics achievement in the state:

- Rigorous, balanced content and performance standards in mathematics
- The establishment of a stable, coherent, and informative system of assessment
- High-quality instruction for all students, including adequate time, adequate instructional materials, mathematically powerful teachers, and additional time in the school day and school year
- Research to improve mathematics education along with the improvement of the *Mathematics Framework*
- Parents as partners: supporting the role of parents in their children’s education

In 1997 the U.S. Department of Education issued a white paper prepared for U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley and titled *Mathematics Equals Opportunity*.¹⁰ It reaffirmed the need for states to adopt rigorous standards in mathematics with the conclusion:

In the United States today, mastering mathematics has become more important than ever. Students with a strong grasp of mathematics have an advantage in academics and in the job market. The eighth grade is a critical point in mathematics education. Achievement at that stage clears the way for students to take rigorous high school mathematics and science courses—keys to college entrance and success in the labor force.

The Advent of Standards and a New Role for the Frameworks

In the first year of Delaine Eastin’s superintendency, a rigorous set of voluntary standards in every core subject area, including