

# **Better Schools: How Do We Answer the Problem of Declining Test Scores for California Middle School Students?**

## **Reading Situation:**

In the last several years, there has been a lot of discussion about how California middle school students are doing in areas such as reading, writing, math and science. Critics of California schools say test scores in these areas show that something is wrong. Kids aren't doing as well as they should and when compared to students in other nations, they are doing downright poorly. As you read this article about educational tests, be thinking about how educators can help middle school students achieve more academically.

## **In the Middle: California Middle School Test Scores Not Showing As Much Progress as Elementary Schools**

By K. J. Folmar

*Mercury News*, January 29, 2001

It's puzzling educators throughout the state. As test scores rise for California students in elementary schools, they begin to drop for sixth graders and then decline steadily throughout middle school. Worse, they don't rise again until 11<sup>th</sup> grade. What causes test scores to decline for middle school students?

Some educators say middle school is a tricky time. Not only does classwork get tougher when students leave elementary school, but the social pressures adolescents face become more intense. So it's little wonder, they say, that kids at this age would have a harder time focusing on school. But critics of the education system say, "Unacceptable." They point to achievement test scores for California students on the last Stanford 9 test, a statewide test which is given yearly to all second through eleventh graders. The numbers are clear. The average score of fifth graders in math was 76% and in language, 75%. From there scores drop each year until by tenth grade, the average percentile score in math was 58% and in language, 66%.

This trend is apparently worse in California than in other states in the nation. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which is given every four years shows California fourth graders doing well compared to other fourth graders across the nation. Unfortunately, middle schools students are doing worse than their counterparts in 35 other states. Only 14 states have worse middle school test scores. For example, in 1996 only 29% of the eighth graders tested in science scored at grade level compared to 45% of the fourth graders. Worse, eighth graders showed no gains in science at all from the 1970 NAEP test to 1996 NAEP test. In writing eighth grade scores were unchanged from 1984 to 1996.

To fight off this sharp decline in academic performance, California Governor Gray Davis recently proposed increasing the school year for middle school students by 30 days. He suggested that by increasing the amount of time students spent in school, gains could be made especially in the area of mathematics and algebra. In Texas, where middle school students have done well on national tests, the total school year is 187 days, seven more than in California. In Japan, the school year is 223 days.

Not everyone is as sure as Governor Davis is that this plan will really raise middle school students' academic performance. "Kids that are in their adolescent years are just different for a teacher to deal with than kids in elementary or high school," says Kevin Gordon of the California Association of Schools. "More doesn't always mean better. I think the Governor's heart is in the right place about wanting to see middle school kids do better, but there are probably better ways to accomplish this."

If we agree that there is a problem with middle school kids doing poorly in school, and if we disagree with proposals like Governor Davis's, then we need to think of **other** ways to solve the problem.

### **Writing Directions:**

The article you have just read discusses the problem of falling test scores for middle school students. Obviously educators, parents and state legislators are concerned about this trend. If we agree that there is a problem with middle school kids doing poorly in school, and if we disagree with proposals like Governor Davis's, then we need to think of **other** ways to solve the problem.

Consider the things you read in the article and the things you have learned from your own life experience, and write a problem-solution essay suggesting other ways to help middle school students in California achieve more academically. Use the following structure in writing your essay.

In the introduction, **summarize the problem.**

**Propose one or more solutions** to the problem.

**Convince your reader** that your proposed solution(s) will work.

Be sure your paper contains:

- ✍ correct spelling and punctuation
- ✍ complete sentences
- ✍ clear, legible handwriting

When you are done, go back over your paper carefully. Check for words you may have left out. Look for errors and make sure your paper contains the items listed above.