

ACHIEVEMENT IN SAN DIEGO: A PROGRESS REPORT

Statement of Findings

In the spring of 2002 the San Diego Achievement Forum, a network of researchers and higher education leaders with a strong interest in K-12 student performance, set out to document the progress of student achievement in San Diego City Schools. Our group was assembled to provide a neutral and credible summary of the status and direction of achievement in the District. This effort does not seek to ascribe a cause to the trends outlined below, but merely to share our best sense of how achievement in the District is changing over time.

The major findings of the Achievement Forum are:

- Student achievement in the District is on the rise. Over the past four years San Diego City Schools has made demonstrable gains in student achievement in the core subject areas of Reading and Mathematics.
- The “achievement gap” between white students and students of color is narrowing. Students from traditionally underserved ethnic groups are making greater gains than their white counterparts. We also observe that students for whom English is a second language have made notable gains in English literacy.
- The performance of the District’s “Focus Schools,” those elementary schools targeted for special investments and supports by the District’s reform program, has also increased. The Focus Schools have outpaced the average rate of improvement among the other elementary schools in the District in moving students up from the bottom rungs of academic performance.
- Despite the District’s overall gains, the performance of our high school students remains highly problematic. Far too many high school students in San Diego are failing to meet our standards for academic excellence. Particularly troubling is the failure of large numbers of current high school students to pass California’s new High School Exit Exam.
- San Diego’s performance gains, while notable, are not unique in California. Many major urban school districts across the state have made comparable gains between 1998 and 2002. However, San Diego’s absolute levels of performance continue to equal or exceed those of similar school districts in other parts of the state.

We review these findings in greater detail below.

1. Student Achievement in San Diego City Schools is Increasing.

Based on the District's progress on California's state-mandated series of assessments, the Stanford-9 and the California Standards Test, achievement in the District is clearly on the rise. Between 1998 and 2002 the District saw a seven percent increase in students testing at or above the national average on the Stanford-9 achievement test in Reading and a 10 percent increase in Mathematics. The District is also making progress based on a newer assessment – the California Standards Test for English Language Arts – that began in 2001. Between 2001 and 2002 the District saw a two percent increase in the number of students meeting the state's adopted standards for English literacy based on their performance on this assessment.

The progress being realized by the District is also evident in the multi-year movement of its students from lower to higher quartiles of student performance on the Stanford-9. For example, many students have moved out of the lowest quartile of performance over the past four years in the subject area of Reading. Between 1998 and 2002 the District has reduced the percentage of students scoring in the bottom quartile in this subject area by nine percentile points. Similar rates of progress have been achieved in Mathematics. Over the past four years the percentage of students scoring in the lowest quartile in mathematics has declined by 11 percentile points, while the percentage of students in the top quartile has risen from 24 percent to 31 percent.

2. The "Achievement Gap" is Closing.

Based on the District's performance on the state assessments, the achievement gap between white students and traditionally underserved ethnic groups is narrowing. Between 1998 and 2002 the progress of African-American, Latino, Asian, Filipino and Indochinese students on the Stanford-9 has outpaced the progress of white students. Today more students, and a greater percentage of students, from all of these ethnic groups score at or above the national average in both Reading and Mathematics than in 1998. In Math, African-American, Latino, Indochinese and Filipino students have all posted double-digit percentage gains during this period.

The progress of students from different ethnic backgrounds is also revealed by looking at the movement of student groups over time across the quartiles of performance on the Stanford-9. When testing began in 1998, 56% of Hispanic students in the district, and nearly half of African American and Indochinese students, were scoring in the bottom quartile of student performance on the Stanford-9 in Reading. Over the past four years the District has reduced these numbers from 46% to 33% for African-Americans, from 56% to 42% for Latinos and from 44% to 24% for Indochinese students. (White students experienced a five percentile point reduction in the same time period.)

The District is also making progress in educating students for whom English is not their primary language to higher levels of English literacy. (Unfortunately, we do not yet have data regarding

whether these English Language Learner – or “ELL” - students are maintaining or strengthening their proficiency in their first language). Measuring the performance of ELL students in English literacy over time is complicated by the fact that these students are constantly being reclassified based on their acquisition of English skills, and due to the fact that new ELL students are entering the District every year, replenishing the pool of students who are in the early stages of mastering English.

One can overcome this difficulty by tracking the multi-year progress of all the students who were designated ELL in 1998, the first year in which the Stanford-9 was administered, regardless of whether they have since been reclassified. In 1998 over two-thirds of these students scored in the bottom fifth of the national distribution on the Stanford-9 in English-language Reading. By 2001 this number had been reduced to 46%.

3. High School Student Achievement Remains Disturbingly Low

Our survey of student achievement data often found troubling levels of performance in the District’s high schools. An estimated fourteen out of every 100 students entering the District’s high schools drop out prior to graduation. For Latino students this number is 17 out of every 100, and for African-Americans it’s 21 for every 100 students. About four out every ten graduates complete the sequence of courses necessary to apply to the UC/CSU systems, but only about 25% of African-American and Latino students complete this challenging sequence of coursework. Moreover, the gains observed on the Stanford-9 in the District, particularly in Reading, are largely concentrated in the elementary and middle schools.

Students entering the District’s high schools are often unprepared for the coursework expected of them, requiring interventions to bring them up to standards in core subject areas. For example, over half of the entering ninth grade students in 2002 were not proficient in Algebra, a requirement that should be mastered during the eighth grade. Perhaps most disturbing, a large number of the District’s current high school students has not yet passed California’s new High School Exit Exam (HSEE), a relatively undemanding assessment of basic skills that is required for graduation from high school starting in 2004. For example, about 50% of this year’s 11th grade students (the class of 2004) have not yet passed one or both sections – English Language Arts and Mathematics – of the High School Exit Exam.

4. Achievement is Rising at the Focus Schools

While this report does not claim to assess the overall impact of the District’s *Blueprint for Student Success*, we were able to look at the performance of those elementary school campuses (the so-called “Focus Schools”) that were targeted for extra investments, interventions and supports in the early stages of the reforms.

Since 1998 the eight originally designated Focus Schools have kept pace with the other elementary schools in the District in moving students to the point of being at or above the national average in both reading and mathematics. But they have also exceeded the progress of

all other elementary schools (taken together) in moving students out of the bottom quartile of performance on the Stanford-9. Between 1998 and 2002 the Focus Schools have reduced the number of their students scoring in the bottom quartile in Reading on the Stanford-9 by 25 percentile points. During the same time period, the number of students at the Focus Schools scoring in the lowest quartile in Mathematics has dropped by 24 percentile points.

5. Most Major Urban School Districts in California have made Performance Gains since 1998.

Because different districts around the country use different assessment tools, we can really only compare San Diego's gains to other large urban districts in California, which all participate in the STAR testing program. Most major urban school districts across the state have made measurable gains on the Stanford-9 since 1998. To this extent, San Diego's gains, while notable, are not unique in California. However, as of 2002 San Diego City's Schools' absolute levels of performance were the highest among the five largest districts in the state. San Diego is also among the top performers among major urban districts with similar socio-economic and demographic characteristics.

Assessing multi-year performance on the Stanford-9 from a comparative perspective is complicated by the fact that different school districts have increased the percentage of students who are tested at different rates between 1998 and 2002. San Diego, for example, has increased the percentage of students tested from 95.06% in 1998 to 97.33% in 2002. Some districts have increased their testing pool by greater percentages, while others have actually reduced the percentage of students tested during this time period. This fact makes it difficult to gauge the comparative rates of progress being achieved by different school districts across the state.

For more information on the work of the San Diego Achievement Forum, please contact San Diego Dialogue at 858-534-8638.