

NEW K-12 TEST DATA THAT IS WORTHY OF OUR ATTENTION

Executive Director's Column
A CONFESSION. A SAD STORY.
AND A PLEA FOR HELP!

This report has been prepared by Scott Grimes, Director of Policy Research & Program Development, San Diego Dialogue

I confess. I have become obsessed with the limitations of our local news media. Like a dog with an old bone, I can't let go even though I know it won't do any good to continue to struggle.



Exec. Dir. Chuck Nathanson

Over the past half-year, I have used this column to complain about disappointing news coverage of at least six issues that seem to me central to the future well-being of this region: the debate over stronger regional governance, the linked crises in transportation and housing, the crucial but precarious water transfer with Imperial County, the possibility of a joint aqueduct with Baja California, the status of progress on school reform in San Diego City Schools, and a San Diego-based solution to the problem of border security. Better public understanding of these issues, I believe, would help to resolve them.

As a result of this mighty exercise of the editorial pen, I have been able to detect not one iota of change in media behavior, and I have now spoken with enough editors and reporters to believe that change is unlikely.

The media defense goes something like this: "Yes, the stories you are talking about should be covered more deeply and regularly, but we have a hard enough time just keeping up with the daily news grind. We are understaffed, overworked, and underpaid. The time and talent to do the more complicated stories you are asking for simply does not exist in this community at this time."

If true, this is a sad state of affairs, and I am prepared to believe that it is at least partly true. Still, community pressure might make some difference in the reallocation of media news priorities and resources.

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Given the intense interest in the status of K-12 education reform in the San Diego region, it's surprising that there is so little attention given to data that is reported to policy-makers and the public on student and school performance. This is especially surprising when new data comes to light that responds to the variety of critiques that are traditionally leveled at the most commonly reported indicators of student achievement.

Recently a series of new data sets were released by San Diego City Schools and presented to the school district's Board of Trustees regarding the status of student achievement within the school system. While this data received no coverage in the press, it's worthy of attention because it addresses many of the criticisms that outside experts offer when looking at the way that our school systems, and the state of California, measure student performance.

In this issue of San Diego Dialogue Report we look at three of the most commonly leveled criticisms of student achievement data in San Diego and describe how these new data sets help to respond to these critiques. We also look at how the Focus Schools are doing in comparison to the rest of the District, as it is these schools have received the greatest attention in the Blueprint for Student Success.

The most commonly leveled criticisms of student achievement data are:

Criticism # 1:

State-mandated achievement exams only score students relative to each other, they don't tell us how students are doing compared to an absolute standard.

Criticism # 2:

Looking at student achievement data over multiple years is misleading, because the same students weren't tested in every year.

Criticism # 3:

Looking at the percentage of students who graduate doesn't tell us what the graduate has achieved. We need to look at the absolute standard of performance achieved by high school students, not merely whether they earned credits and received a diploma.

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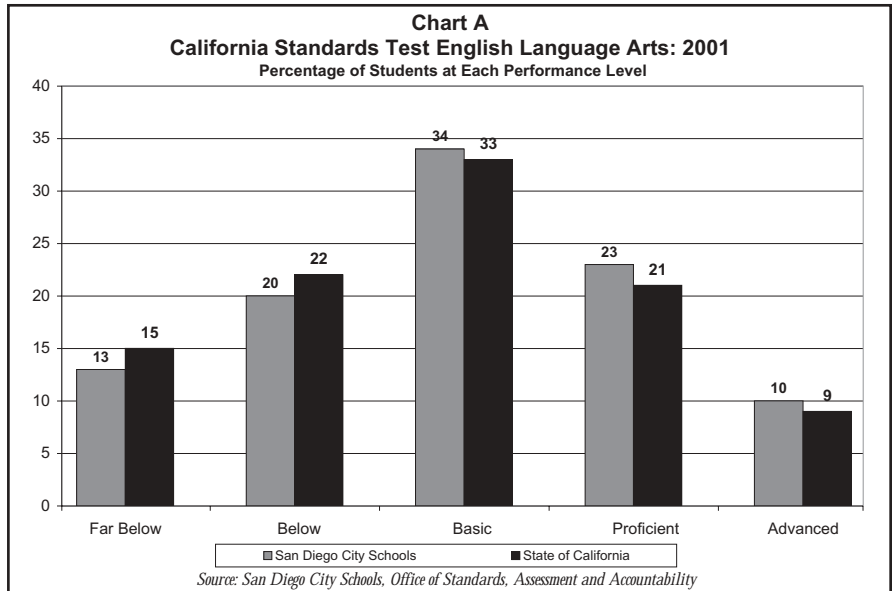
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New K-12 Test Data

ARE OUR STUDENTS MEETING CALIFORNIA STANDARDS?

Criticism # 1 – State-mandated achievement exams only score students relative to each other, they don't tell us how students are doing compared to an absolute standard.

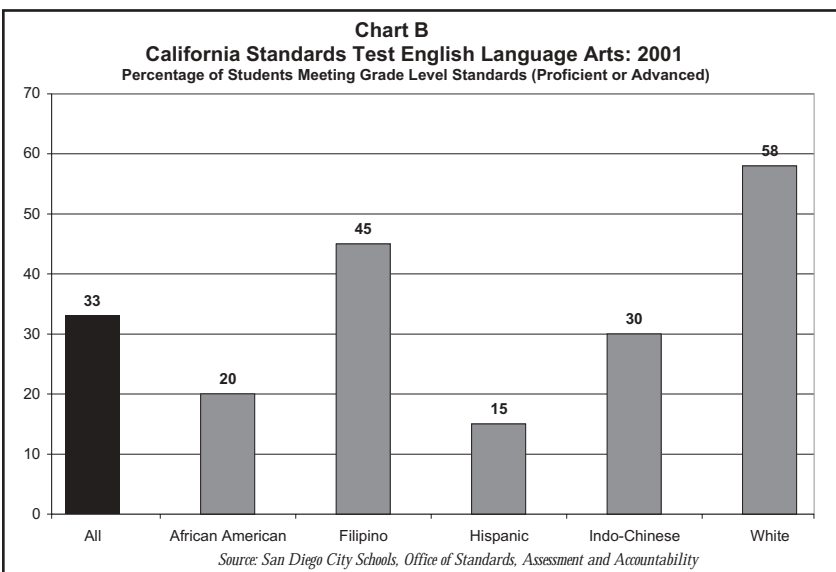
Many critics (including writers in this publication) have noted that the widely reported Stanford-9 test, which is mandated for all students in the state of California, is a “norm-referenced” assessment. In other words, it compares the performance of students against a national norm, which is derived from a national sample of students who took the same exam. As a result, the Stanford-9 may tell you that a student scored in the “75th percentile” (relative to the national sample), but it doesn't indicate whether the student knows and can do what they are supposed to, given their grade level and the academic standards adopted by the state and/or their school district.



During the past academic year the state of California, for the first time, scored and reported student performance on the California Standards Test, a set of examination questions and writing exercises administered as part of the state's testing regimen that is benchmarked against the state's adopted standards for English Language Arts. The results of this exam provide a new window into the status of student achievement in San Diego City Schools.

As noted in Chart A, substantial numbers of students in San Diego Unified continue to perform below the state's adopted standards for academic achievement in this subject area.

Nearly two-thirds of the District's students are scoring below standards in English Language Arts.



Students who scored at a “proficient” or “advanced” level are considered to be meeting the state's standards. Students scoring at the “basic” level are considered to be close to meeting the standard, while the balance of the students score below or far below the state's standards of achievement. As shown in the chart, about 1/3 of the District's students are currently meeting the state's standards in this subject area, while nearly two-thirds are scoring below standards. It's worth noting that the District does slightly outperform the state as a whole on this assessment.

There is even greater cause for concern when looking at this assessment if the data on student achievement is disaggregated by ethnicity. This breakdown is displayed in Chart B. While approximately 1/3 of the District's students are performing to standards, only 15% of the District's Hispanic students, and only 20% of its African-American students, are scoring at a Proficient or Advanced level on this assessment. By contrast, 58% of the District's White students meet the state's performance standards in this subject area.

New K-12 Test Data

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS ARE MAKING REAL PROGRESS

Criticism # 2: Looking at student achievement data over multiple years is misleading, because the same students weren't tested in every year.

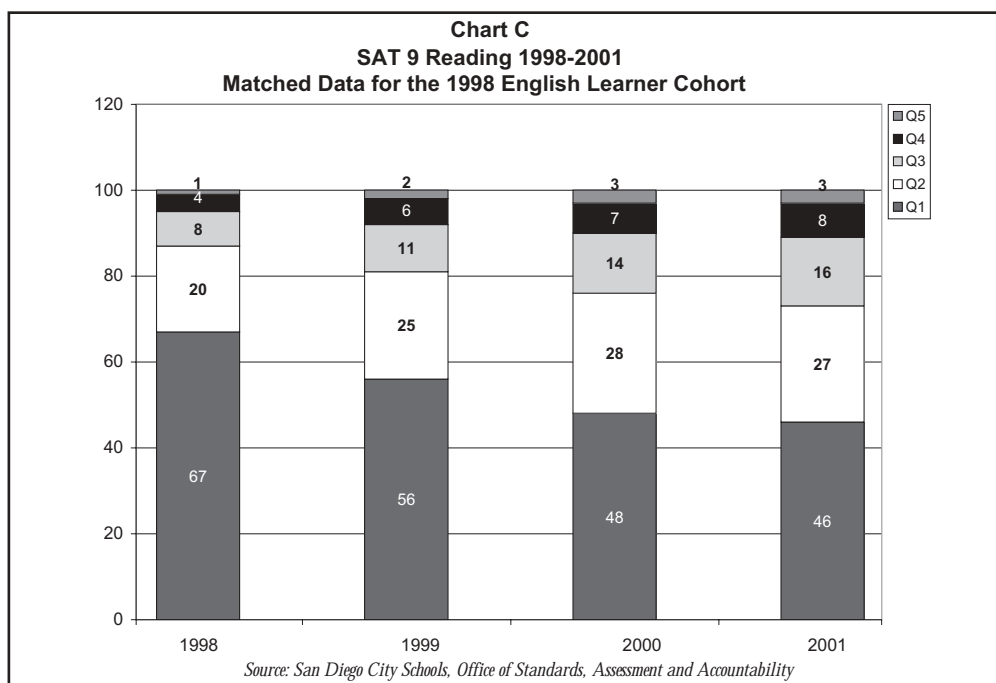
Another criticism of the Stanford-9 results, at least as they are commonly reported, is that the group of students tested changes to a certain degree from year to year. As students move through the school system they will move into, and out of, the band of students (grades 2-11) who must take the Stanford-9. Also, large urban districts like San Diego City Schools experience student “transiency,” which causes some students to be tested one year and then not tested the next because they have left the school district. Finally, in the early years of the Stanford-9 there were substantial numbers of students who were exempted from having to take the test. As these students have been brought into the testing pool they have increased and changed the composition of the set of students taking the assessment.

Due to these factors, critics of the testing regimen have called for the reporting of multi-year “matched data,” in which the performance of only those students who have taken the test every year over the last four years are included in the results. In a sense, this is a “fairer” way of looking at the school system’s outcomes, because it reports the results of only those students that the District could affect over this entire stretch of their academic careers. Recently San Diego City Schools has released a new analysis, based on matched data, which shows the gains being made by students within the system. This analysis provides additional evidence that the achievement gap, while still significant, seems to be shrinking.

Chart C displays the performance of students on the SAT-9 over the past four years for the cohort of students who were classified as “English Language Learners” in 1998. The graph shows shifts in student performance over the four years across the five performance “bands,” or quintiles, of the Stanford-9. In other words, students scoring in Q1 fell within the 1st-19th percentile ranking when compared to the national norm, while students in Q5 scored in the top 20%, based on the national sample.

As shown in the graph, between 1998 and 2001 fewer and fewer English Language Learner (ELL) students performed at the lowest levels. In 1998 67% of ELL students scored in the

“In 1998, 67% of ELL students scored in the bottom quintile, while by 2001 this number had shrunk to 46%. The percentage of students scoring in the top two quintiles more than doubled during this time period.”



bottom quintile, while by 2001 this number had shrunk to 46%. The percentage of students scoring in the top two quintiles more than doubled during this time period. In the future it will be important to continue to track the performance of students using matched data, not only on the Stanford-9, but also on the California Standards Test and the District’s own standards-based assessments. These types of analysis will provide the clearest, most accurate portrait of the actual performance of school system in helping all students to achieve high standards.

New K-12 Test Data

BIG FAILURE RATE FOR HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAM THAT IS BASED ON EIGHTH GRADE STANDARDS

Criticism # 3: Looking at the percentage of students who graduate doesn't tell us what the graduate has achieved. We need to look at the absolute standard of performance achieved by high school students, not merely whether they earned credits and received a diploma.

Critics of the American high school are increasingly pointed in their critiques of the worth of a high school diploma. They point out that employers find many high school graduates lack the basic skills necessary to be useful as employees. Large numbers of entering college students are forced to take remedial courses, because they did not achieve the knowledge and skills in high school necessary to succeed at the collegiate level.

As a result, many states, including California, are now requiring students to pass a high school exit exam before earning a diploma.

Recently the first round of data on student performance on the new high school exit exam was released to the public. The results show the substantial efforts that still need to be undertaken to ensure that all students achieve rigorous standards of achievement before graduating from high school. In the spring of 2001 9th graders across the state were afforded the opportunity to take the new high school exit exam. In San Diego City Schools, 87% of the 9th graders in the system opted to take the test.

Chart D shows the performance of the District's students on the assessment, as compared with the performance of students statewide. Separate results are displayed for English Language Arts and Mathematics (students must pass both subject areas to successfully pass the exam and graduate from high school.) As noted in the graph, a little over two-thirds of the students tested in San Diego passed the English component of the exam, while less than half passed the math portion.

On one hand, these results might seem encouraging. After all, these students are at the beginning of their high school careers and presumably over the next three years they will acquire additional knowledge and skills in both subject areas. But a substantial challenge remains, particularly in the area of mathematics. Also, in the larger scheme of educational reform, it's important to note that this exam is not particularly rigorous.

Passing the mathematics portion of the exam, for example, requires only mastering the standards for math set for those who have completed the eighth grade. In other words, it's possible to pass the high school exit exam and still not master the academic standards that have been adopted by the District through the senior year of high school.

Reviewing and understanding data on student achievement in a school system, particularly one as large and diverse as San Diego City Schools, can be a laborious process. It's often difficult to "boil down" conclusions about student progress to a few key points or findings. But looking at data like these is crucial to developing an honest set of benchmarks for a school system that is undergoing enormous change. If we are to develop a true "public" for public schools, we must develop forums and spaces where regular conversations about data can take place. We also must encourage the regional media to cover this type of information with the care and attention it deserves.

"If we are to develop a true "public" for public schools, we must develop forums where regular conversations about data can take place. We also must encourage the regional media to cover this type of information with the care and attention it deserves."

Chart D
California High School Exam
Grade 9 Passing Rates: 2001

Content Area	SDCS	California
English		
Language Arts	68%	64%
Mathematics	44%	44%

Source: San Diego City Schools, Office of Standards, Assessment and Accountability

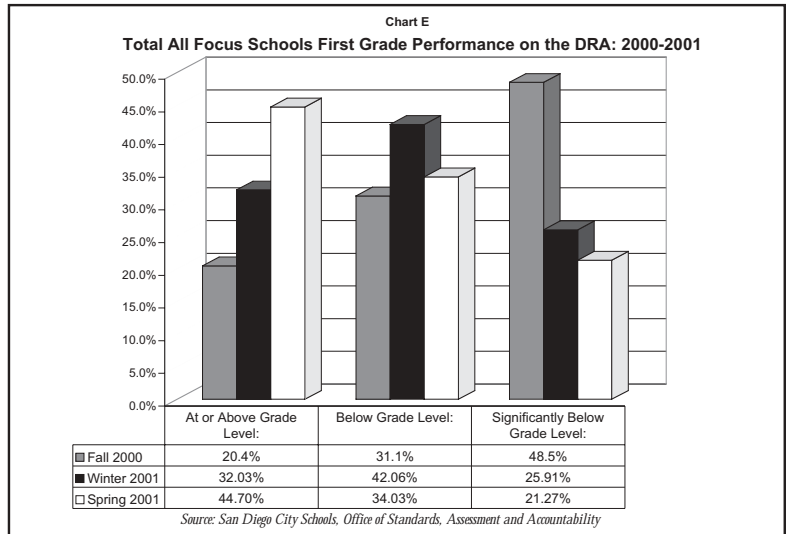
FOCUS SCHOOLS OUTPACE THE DISTRICT

As part of San Diego Dialogue’s continuing examination of student achievement in San Diego City Schools, we have been focusing attention on the performance of District students on locally adopted assessments of student progress. In order to gain a greater understanding of the status and direction of student achievement, it seems important to consider multiple measures of students’ knowledge and skill sets. Rather than focusing exclusively on the state-mandated Stanford-9 test, we choose to examine how the District’s students are performing on all of the assessments administered by their teachers.

In considering these assessments, we are especially interested in the performance of students who have been the recipient of additional supports or interventions under the District’s reform program. For example, we want to see how students are performing at those elementary schools that were originally designated as “Focus Schools” under the District’s Blueprint for Student Success. Each of these schools is a high poverty school site with a majority non-white student enrollment.

Recently we looked at the performance of the eight original “Focus Schools” on the District’s own literacy assessment for the early primary grades, the Developmental Reading Assessment (or DRA).¹ The results provide encouragement regarding the gains being realized at these traditionally low-performing schools:

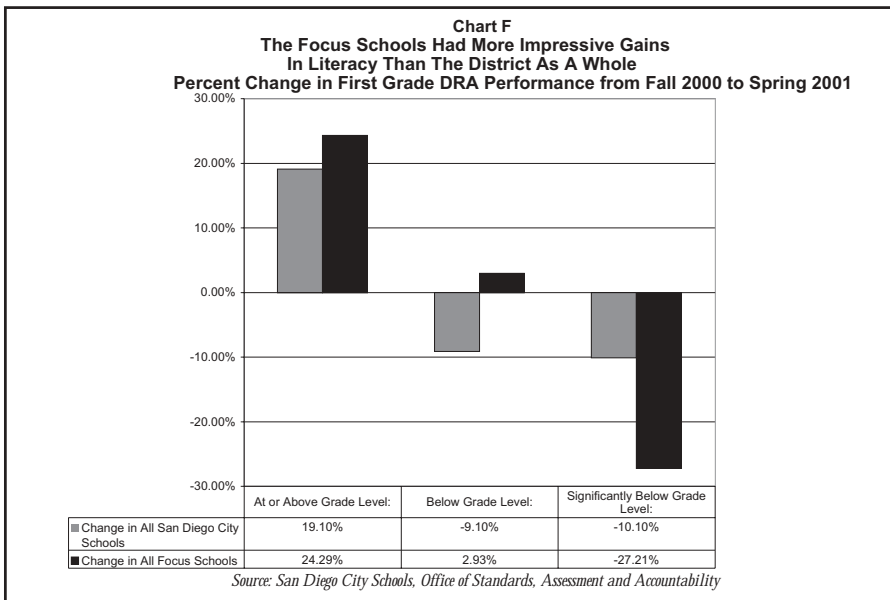
“Taken as a whole, the Focus Schools had more impressive gains in student performance on the DRA than the entire District.”



As shown in Chart E, during 2000-2001 the percentage of first graders at the Focus Schools assessed at being “at or above grade level” in reading grew from 20.4% to 44.7%. The percentage of first grade students classified as “significantly below grade level” dropped from 48.5% to 21.3%.

In the second grade, 16% of the students at the Focus Schools moved from “below grade level” or “significantly below grade level” to “at or above grade level.” The percentage of students scoring “significantly below grade level” dropped from 56.5% to 31.8%.

In the third grade, the percentage of students “at or above grade level” at the Focus Schools grew from 27.8% to 41.6%. The percentage of students scoring “significantly below grade level” fell by 20 percentage points.



Taken as a whole, the Focus Schools had more impressive gains in student performance on the DRA than the entire District. For example, during the 2000-2001 academic year 19% of all District first grade students moved from “below grade level” to “at or above grade level.” However, as shown in Chart F, the Focus Schools had 24% of their students moved above this threshold. Across the entire District, the number of students scoring “significantly below grade level” fell by 10%. In the Focus Schools, this number fell by 27.2%.

These data deserve continued study in the months and years ahead. In particular, by next summer we should have comparable data for the current academic year, which will provide the ability to conduct more extensive, multi-year analysis of student progress on this assessment.

San Diego Dialogue's Cross-Border Economic Bulletin

COULD A LOCAL ANTI-POVERTY PROGRAM PAY FOR ITSELF?



Dr. Jim Gerber, professor of economics at San Diego State University and San Diego Dialogue's Economic Research Fellow, writes the Cross-Border Economic Bulletin

Inflation in San Diego has outstripped income gains, housing prices continue to spiral upwards, and the national recession has made its way into the San Diego economy. There are lots of reasons for pessimism on both sides of the border, particularly declining real incomes at a time when the US tax season is just ahead.

Since April 15 is just around the corner, and given the bleak news about housing affordability and the impact of rising rents on low income residents of San Diego, now is a good time to look at an anti-poverty provision of the federal US tax code—the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The EITC brings well over \$250 million of federal money into the San Diego region and puts it directly into the pockets of low

for low income parents in the United States. In 1998 it put about \$253 million into San Diego's economy, all of which went to 171,381 low income working families. Adjusted for inflation, that's equivalent to \$275 million in 2002, or nearly \$1,600 per household.

The EITC is a system of cash payments to supplement the wages and salaries of working people. In order to qualify, a household must work and have income below a fairly high threshold. Payments rise with increases in income up to the maximum payment, then hold constant over a fairly wide range of income, after which it is gradually phased out with further income gains. Table 1 illustrates the limits for the current tax year.

As stated, the purpose of the EITC is to compensate low income families for Social Security taxes and to increase work effort. Because families without at least one working member do not qualify for the tax credit, it is thought that the program

provides an incentive to increase work effort, especially for single parents who might otherwise choose public assistance over a low paying job. Empirical studies cited in Smeedling, Phillips, and O'Connor (2000) confirm this effect, particularly for single mothers. Although most studies were conducted prior to the welfare reform of the mid-

1990s, different studies using different methods and data confirm that the EITC was the main driving force behind the increased labor force participation rate of single mothers prior to welfare reform.

A secondary effect appears to be that the phasing out of the tax credit at relatively modest income levels reduces the work effort of married women. This follows from the fact that the elimination of the credit for households earning \$28,250 (one child) to \$32,120 (two or more children) reduces the monetary value of work for households that already have at least one income.

Who Knows about the EITC?

In order to receive the EITC, a claimant must file a tax return, but they do not have to know about the program. Many low income claimants may use a tax preparation service that automatically files for them, and if the IRS receives a return that appears to qualify but that has not claimed the credit, it notifies the taxpayer that they may be eligible. Nevertheless,

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Table 1: Earned Income Tax Limits, Tax Year 2001

	No children	One Child	Two or more children
Maximum credit	\$364	\$2,428	\$4,008
Income range receiving	\$4,750-\$5,950	\$7,100-\$13,100	\$10,000-\$13,100
maximum Income limit for credit	\$10,700	\$28,250	\$32,120

Source: Internal Revenue Service, Form 596.

income families. Nationally, it lifts more children out of poverty than all other means tested federal programs combined. A closer look at this program might offer some insights into how governments and NGOs could reduce local poverty rates in San Diego.

The key ideas of this issue of the Cross Border Economic Bulletin are:

- The EITC added over \$253 million to the local economy in 1998, the most recent year of published data;
- In 1998, 14.3% of San Diego tax filers claimed an EITC;
- Hispanics workers are less likely to know about the tax credit, particularly non-English speakers;
- A 1% increase in the number of claimants would add over \$2.7 million to the budgets of 1,710 low income, local households.

The Earned Income Tax Credit

The EITC began in 1975 as a program to offset Social Security taxes paid by low income parents and to encourage parents to work. Currently, it is the largest cash transfer program

Table 2: Who knows about the EITC?

	Ever heard of the EITC (%)		Ever received the EITC (%)	
	Non Hispanic	Hispanic	Non Hispanic	Hispanic
Native born				
US citizen	75.7	53.2	52.2	36.5
Naturalized				
US citizen	48.5	29.6	30.1	17.3
Not a US citizen	47.2	16.5	29.7	5.1
English interview	74.2	53.6	51.0	37.2
Spanish interview	na	15.4	na	4.1

Note: Table is only for respondents who are 200 percent of the federal poverty level or less.

Source: Phillips, 2001.

research confirms that an undetermined percentage of eligible recipients do not claim the credit.

The demographic characteristics of people who do not know about the credit are fairly predictable: they tend to be less well educated and non-English speaking. What is perhaps surprising, however, is that, regardless of race, Hispanics are less likely to be familiar with the credit than any other ethnicity. Consequently, non-English speaking Hispanics are very likely to lack knowledge about the credit.

Table 2, from Phillips (2001), is based on data taken from the 1999 National Survey of American Families, a representative sample of the noninstitutionalized civilian population under 65, and their families. It shows a wide and statistically significant gap between Hispanics and Non-Hispanics, both in their knowledge and utilization of the program. The figures in Table 2 do not reflect that fact that many families may collect the EITC even if they are unaware of the program, since paid tax preparers often claim it automatically. Even in that case, however, the figures in Table 2 make it impossible to believe that there is no difference between Hispanics and Non-Hispanics in their actual rates of program utilization, or that all eligible recipients of either group are claiming the credit.

Where are the eligible claimants in San Diego County?

While the numbers in Table 2 are based on a national survey, residents of San Diego are probably no different in their general pattern of information and utilization. In other words, eligible claimants in San Diego County who do not take advantage of the credit would tend to be relative-

ly heavily concentrated in low-income Hispanic communities. Table 3 shows the ten cities in the county with the lowest household income. It also shows the number of households and the percent headed by a Hispanic householder.

Would an outreach program pay for itself?

It is worth asking the question if a campaign to sign-up eligible households could cover its own costs through increased sales or other tax collections. The average return to San Diego recipients in 1998 was just below \$1,500, or about \$1,600 at today's prices. In 1998 (tax year 1997) 171,381 San Diego residents claimed the EITC. A modest 1% increase in the number of claimants would generate about \$2.7 million in federal payments into the San Diego economy. How much of this ends up in increased sales or other local tax payments depends on a number of factors. Cities normally collect 1% of the sales taxes generated in their jurisdiction (0.01 x 2.7 million = 27,000), but not all of the increased income would be spent on taxable items, nor necessarily even in San Diego. Nevertheless, the relevant question is whether or not there is a better use for city and county money than an outreach program to educate families about the tax credit, particularly in jurisdictions that say they are interested in combating poverty.

The Brookings Institution, "Rewarding Work: The Impact of the Earned Income Tax Credit in Greater San Diego." June, 2001. Available: <http://www.brro.edu/es/urban/eitc/sandiego.pdf>

Phillips, Katherine Ross, "Who Knows about the Earned Income Tax Credit." The Urban Institute. Series B, No. B-27. January, 2001. Available: http://newfederalism.urban.org/html/series_b/b27/b27.html

Smeedling, Timothy, Katherine Ross Phillips, and Michael O'Connor, "The EITC: Expectation, Knowledge, Use, and Economic and Social Mobility," The National Tax Journal. 53(4): 1187-1209. 2000.

Table 3: Where are the eligible claimants in San Diego County?

City	Median Household Income	Share of Households with income below \$25,000	Number of Households	Hispanic Share of Households
National City	31,255	0.39	15,018	0.53
Imperial Beach	33,289	0.33	9,272	0.29
El Cajon	35,551	0.33	34,199	0.16
Escondido	42,641	0.26	43,817	0.25
San Marcos	43,521	0.23	18,111	0.23
Vista	43,647	0.24	28,877	0.25
Oceanside	43,702	0.24	56,488	0.19
La Mesa	43,713	0.24	24,186	0.10
Lemon Grove	44,796	0.21	8,488	0.21
San Diego	45,040	0.24	450,691	0.18

Source: 2000 US Census, and SANDAG, Data Warehouse.

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A CONFESSION. A SAD STORY. AND A PLEA FOR HELP!

But that isn't the whole story, as this issue of San Diego Dialogue Report should make obvious. All the data presented here on test scores in San Diego City Schools is publicly available. Indeed, all of it except the material on the Focus Schools was presented at a school board meeting in the presence of the key news reporters. And getting the material on the Focus Schools merely took asking the question, "I wonder how these schools are doing in comparison with the rest of the District, since these troubled schools are where the greatest resources of reform have been concentrated?"

In other words, we aren't talking about weeks of investigation by a team of New York Times-caliber reporters. This is run-of-the-mill stuff ready for use by any reporter with an interest in it.

And how could it not be judged interesting? Look at page 2 where we report the results of testing for the very first time how San Diego Unified students are doing with respect to the academic standards adopted by the State of California. Previous tests have merely shown how our students are doing relative to a national norm, and not what they know compared to what they are expected to know.

The results are dismal, and if properly presented in the media, could have served as a severe wake-up call to parents in the District, many of whom have no idea how poorly their children are doing. For example, nearly two-thirds of the students in the District are failing to meet state standards in English Language Arts. Only 15% of the District's Hispanic students, and only 20% of its African-American students are scoring at a Proficient or Advanced level on this assessment.

But there are also very interesting *positive* stories in the data presented on pages 3 and 5. First, from data worked up for the first time by the District, we learn that English Language Learners have made tremendous progress in reading over the past four years. In other words, many of the same students who were scoring poorly against a national norm in 1998 are now scoring much higher.

And equally impressive are the results at the Focus Schools, which are all high poverty school sites with a majority of non-white student enrollment. The results show that a greater percentage of these students moved up out of "below grade level" categories than did students in the rest of the District.

In other words, it's beginning to look as if the big investments in coaching teachers, especially teachers of our neediest students, are beginning to pay off. At least the results are tantalizing enough to warrant an editor sending out reporters to talk with some of these teachers and find out why it is that they seem to be having greater success.

Yet these are the stories we don't see. Instead, we get high profile displays about the telephone bills and e-mails of school board members, and disputes about how to determine the Superintendent's bonus pay.

So you tell me, please. Do we need as a community to go to work on the media's priorities and news judgment? Or should I get off of this whining obsession? After all, it's Spring, and the tulips are coming out.