



Clarifying
Complex
Education
Issues

California's Lowest-Performing Schools

*Who they are,
the challenges they face,
and how they're improving*



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California's school accountability policies galvanized the public's attention in the year 2000 with the first ranking of California's public schools. The ranking was derived from a single set of measures: 1999 student test results on a multiple-choice test of basic skills, the Stanford-9. Most of the schools in the state were given an Academic Performance Index (API) score, which summarized into one number their students' test scores across grade levels and subjects. Based on their API score, schools were then ranked into 10 deciles, with California's lowest-performing 20% of schools making up Deciles 1 and 2.

This report provides a profile of that first group of lowest-ranked schools and describes the progress they have made under substantial pressure for improvement. The report is organized into three sections.

Section 1: Who were the first group of schools identified as lowest performing?

On many factors, these schools stood out dramatically from the schools that were ranked in Deciles 3 through 10 that first year. This section looks at where these schools were located, both geographically and by size of school district. It also examines the extent to which low school performance correlates with the demographics of a school's students and the characteristics of the school itself, including teaching staff and total enrollment.

Section 2: How can the progress of these schools best be evaluated? The state has now ranked schools, set growth targets, and measured improvement through three API cycles. During that time, most of the Decile 1 & 2 schools have progressed, some dramatically. Yet evaluating their relative progress—and in particular what may have contributed to the improvements—is a complex undertaking. This section describes the process EdSource used in an effort to do just that. It included establish-

ing a benchmark for what constitutes “exemplary progress” and also identifying a group of schools that are “beating the odds” by demonstrating consistently high student achievement on the API although they serve predominantly low-income students. This section also describes an EdSource survey sent to principals at these schools meant to further illuminate the changes they are making and the challenges they face.

Section 3: What has happened to the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools? Along with California schools generally, the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools have raised their API scores. And as is the case statewide, the elementary schools have been most successful in doing so. This section summarizes their quantitative improvement and then uses survey results and interviews to explore possible explanations for the most notable improvement where that has occurred. Those elementary schools who have done best appear to be making progress in part because the state's standards-based reforms, such as changes in reading instruction, became more fully implemented and aligned during this time period. That made it easier for many elementary schools to make changes in curriculum and instruction, and to develop an intense, schoolwide focus on improvement. Their stories increase optimism that effective statewide policies can help schools overcome the deficits that some of California's most needy students bring with them to school. On the other hand, middle and high schools have made substantially less progress. This section

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Figure 1

A comparison of student and school characteristics between all 1999 Decile 1 & 2 and Decile 3–10 schools

In this chart and throughout the report, the median is used rather than the mean (average). To find the **median school**, one orders all schools from least to greatest based on one characteristic, then picks the school in the middle (the 50% mark). For each characteristic of interest, the list comes out in a different order, and the school at the midpoint or median of each list is a different school. Using this approach prevents the data from becoming skewed by very large or small values.

Similarly, the range for the **middle half of schools** is based on a specific characteristic. To find the middle range, one orders all schools from least to greatest, then picks a) the school that is exactly 25% of the way up the list and b) the school that is exactly 75% of the way up the list. The resulting values mark the low and high end, respectively, of the middle half of schools.

For this report, the phrase **all schools** refers to the schools in the California Department of Education’s 1999 Base API database—a total of 6,815 schools.

Student Characteristics	Decile 1 & 2 schools	Decile 3–10 schools
	Median Range for middle half	Median Range for middle half
English learners	52% 35% – 68%	12% 5% – 27%
Hispanic	77% 56% – 91%	25% 12% – 44%
White	5% 1% – 13%	51% 26% – 72%
African American	4% 1% – 17%	3% 1% – 9%
Free/reduced price lunch	88% 77% – 95%	39% 18% – 62%
Parents not high school grads	41% 29% – 54%	10% 4% – 20%
One parent a college grad	10% 6% – 17%	34% 21% – 50%
School Characteristics		
Elementary* enrollment	736 554 – 954	567 439 – 771
Middle school* enrollment	970 706 – 1,366	847 632 – 1,081
High school* enrollment	1,849 995 – 2,742	1,800 1,139 – 2,300
Teachers not fully credentialed	21% 12% – 32%	6% 0% – 13%
Teachers in first two years**	12% 6% – 17%	7% 3% – 12%

Note: All data are based on the California Department of Education’s (CDE’s) 1999 API database, except where otherwise noted.

* Data based on the CDE’s 1998–99 California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS) database.

** Weighted by percent full-time equivalent (FTE). Data based on CBEDS database.

explores some of the possible reasons for and implications of their lack of comparable improvement.

While not every community has schools that are struggling the way the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools are, the story of these schools is important to all Californians. To the extent that California's lowest-performing schools are improving, state policymakers, educators, and the public as a whole can learn from their experiences and perhaps gain some insight into what works and what does not.

Their success, and more importantly the success of their students, is vital to the state's long-term social and economic health. Their failure is not an outcome any Californian should simply accept.

Section 1

Who were the first group of schools identified as lowest performing?

In January 2000 the state posted the first set of API scores, the "1999 Base API." Those scores were derived from the results of student tests administered in the spring of 1999, the latter half of the 1998–99 school year. They were called "base" API scores because they formed a baseline against which the subsequent year's scores would be measured. (See the box on page 4 for a full discussion of API terms and mechanics.)

A total of 6,815 out of about 8,000 schools received a 1999 Base API score. Of those schools, 4,854 were elementary schools, 1,119 were middle schools, and 842 were high schools. The scores could range from a low of 200 to a high of 1000. For each of the three school types, schools were ranked by API score into 10 groups of equal size known as "deciles," with the bottom 10% of each school type belonging to Decile 1, the second lowest to Decile 2, and so on.

The 1,362 schools ranked as Decile 1 or 2 in 1999 included:

- 968 elementary schools with API scores ranging from 302 to 496;
- 222 middle schools with API scores ranging from 345 to 513; and
- 172 high schools with API scores ranging from 297 to 523.

Throughout this report, the above-mentioned schools are referred to as "1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools." Their higher-ranked counterparts will generally be referred to as "1999 Decile 3–10 schools." Many of the statistics (e.g., enrollment figures) are from the 1998–99 school year because they help describe the context for the test results that led to schools' rankings in 1999.

Where these schools are located

The geographic distribution of the lowest-performing schools in the state in 1999 did not follow a discernible pattern. Some urban areas have high percentages of struggling schools and some do not. The same is true in the many rural

counties in California. And while the lowest-performing schools tended to be concentrated in the largest districts, this too was far from universal. It is also important to keep in mind that about 1,500 California schools were not included in the 1999 API reporting at all. State law excluded from the 1999–2000 API ranking about 480 schools with fewer than 100 student test-takers and an even larger number of schools that serve specialized populations, such as juvenile court and continuation high schools.

Decile 1 & 2 schools were spread unevenly

The 1,362 schools with the lowest API scores in 1999—those in Decile 1 & 2—were not evenly distributed throughout the state. To take into account the vast population differences in California's 58 counties, EdSource looked at the percentage of schools in each county that fell into the bottom two deciles. A total of 18 counties had no schools in Decile 1 or 2. (See Figure 2 on page 5.) Some of these counties—such as Mono, Trinity, and Sierra—are the least populated in the state and have just a handful of schools. However, these counties also include the more heavily populated Placer and Humboldt, which have 72 and 45 schools respectively.

By contrast, six counties had 35% or more of their schools in Decile 1 & 2. Three were in the Central Valley, and all six were outside of the state's large northern and southern population centers. They ranged in size from Colusa County, where four out of nine schools were among the state's lowest performing, to Fresno County, where 85 out of 219 fit that description. It is notable that many of the other schools in these largely rural areas were not even included in these calculations because they had 100 or fewer students.

In California's most populous county, Los Angeles, a third of the schools were in the lowest two deciles. But in the two next largest counties, Orange and San Diego, just 12% and 11% of schools, respectively, fit that designation. The highly populated counties in the Bay Area also had quite a range: from 9% of schools in San Mateo to 17% in both Alameda and San Francisco.

As will be discussed below, a common characteristic of the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools was a high number of students in poverty. Many people commonly think of urban poverty in this regard. However, many of the counties with high concentrations of Decile 1 & 2 schools were in rural areas, and the poverty rates in those counties were often significantly above the state average as well. Although rural poverty may not affect as many students as urban poverty, it is pervasive and problematic in many small communities in California.

Large districts had more struggling schools

The urban, suburban, or rural nature of a community does not seem to be a strong predictor of school performance. School district size, however, appears to have a somewhat stronger relationship to performance.

The 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools were striking in the degree to which they were concentrated in big school districts, all of which are in urban areas. About 40% of the Decile 1 & 2 schools were in the 10 largest districts in the state. Yet these districts had just 19% of the schools that received API scores, thus they had about twice “their share” of Decile 1 & 2 schools. Even more striking, more than half of the 565 schools in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) were in Decile 1 or 2 in 1999.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, 30% of the Decile 1 & 2 schools came from districts serving fewer than 15,000 students. This means that only about 12% of the API schools in these smaller districts were in the bottom two deciles. Figure 3

(on page 5) gives more detail on the relationship between the percentage of all California schools found in various size districts and their percentage of Decile 1 & 2 schools.

Although the lowest-performing schools in 1999 were found disproportionately in the largest school districts, it is not clear that district size in and of itself is an obstacle to school performance. In some of the large urban districts the proportion of students who are poor or English learners—or both—is huge, yet many of the schools in these districts do a noteworthy job. To some degree, the higher-than-expected proportion of low-performing schools in certain districts certainly relates to the students they serve. However, other factors such as teacher qualifications and school size may also be

Background on California’s API scores and how they are calculated

A school’s Academic Performance Index (API) score is a one-number summary of how its pupils did on the previous spring’s state tests. The API system is organized into two-year cycles, with a “Base API” score for the first year and a “Growth API” score for the second year. (The Base and Growth scores can be thought of as “before” and “after” snapshots.) The calculation of the Base API has changed from year to year as new elements have been added. However, the Growth API each year uses the same elements in the calculation as the Base API from the previous year. Schools are ranked annually based on their Base API scores and then are expected to meet state-defined growth targets.

Not all schools receive API scores. An insufficient number of students tested, irregularities in the test administration, or a special designation—e.g., as a continuation high school, court school, or other alternative school—can exclude a school from the API system. Further, if a school experiences a significant demographic change between the Base and Growth API years, it does not get a Growth API score.

For the first two API cycles (1999/2000 and 2000/2001), the state used only one factor to calculate API scores, the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (Stanford-9)—a basic-skills, multiple-choice achievement test given to all students in grades 2–11. Stanford-9 test scores are reported as national percentile rankings (NPRs), such as “52” in reading, which means that the pupil scored equal to or better than 52% of students in a nationally-representative sample of students. Students receive scores for each subject-matter test they take.

To compute a school’s API score, the test scores for all its students are sorted into five “performance bands.” A school’s API score is basically a summary of the distribution of scores among the five performance bands. API scores can range from 200 to 1000, with 800 being the statewide goal. If all students score in the top performance band on all subtests, the school

has an API score of 1000. (Actual 1999 Base API scores ranged from 297 to 966.)

To achieve growth on its API, a school needs to have a greater percentage of its pupils score in higher performance bands. The API formula rewards growth from the bottom upward more heavily than growth from the middle upward. It is important to note that a school’s Base and Growth API scores are achieved by different groups of students because they are earned in different years. (For example, in a K–5 elementary school, last year’s second graders are compared to this year’s second graders, and last year’s fifth graders are no longer counted at all.) The API does not reflect individual students’ test-score growth.

The calculation of the API has changed over time, as follows:
 1999/2000 and 2000/2001: For grades 2–8, reading scores counted for 30% of a school’s API score, language and spelling each counted for 15%, and math counted for 40%. For grades 9–11, each subtest (reading, language arts, math, history/social studies, and science) counted for 20% of a school’s score.

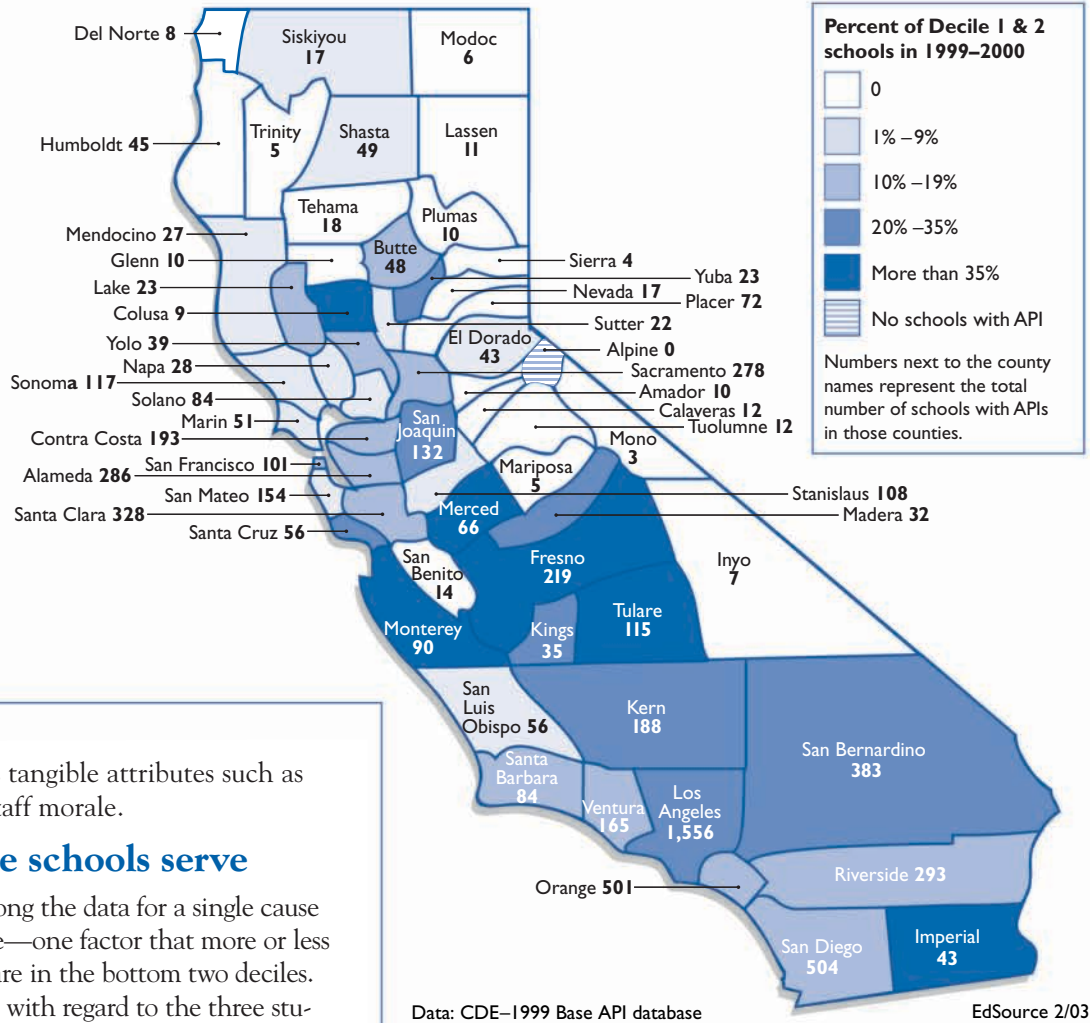
2001/2002: Results from the English Language Arts California Standards Test (CST) were added and counted for 36% of elementary and middle schools’ API scores and 24% of high schools’ scores.

2002/2003: For grades 2–8, 80% of the weight will be on English Language Arts and Math CSTs, and 20% on the norm-referenced test (Stanford-9 in 2002 and CAT/6 in 2003). For grades 9–11, 73% of the weight will be on the English, Math, and History/Social Science CSTs, 15% will be on the High School Exit Exam, and 12% will be on the norm-referenced tests (Stanford-9 and CAT/6).

Whenever new elements are added to the index, Base scores are adjusted so that they are comparable to the Growth scores from the previous cycle.

Figure 2

Decile 1 & 2 schools are spread throughout the state



important, along with less tangible attributes such as community support and staff morale.

The students these schools serve

It is tempting to search among the data for a single cause of poor school performance—one factor that more or less determines which schools are in the bottom two deciles. This is particularly the case with regard to the three student population factors described below: the percent of students who are English learners, who are enrolled in the National School Lunch Program, and who are white versus Hispanic. However, while these student characteristics often correlate with low school performance, they do not represent insurmountable obstacles. For example, some Decile 1 & 2 schools had no English learners, and some served predominantly white students.

The closest to a universal characteristic is poverty. All 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools had relatively high levels of student poverty, although a few had poverty levels equivalent to the median for the state or slightly lower. Poverty is defined as being eligible for the free/reduced price lunch program. Among elementary schools statewide, for example, the median poverty level was 55% of the school's students being eligible for this lunch program.

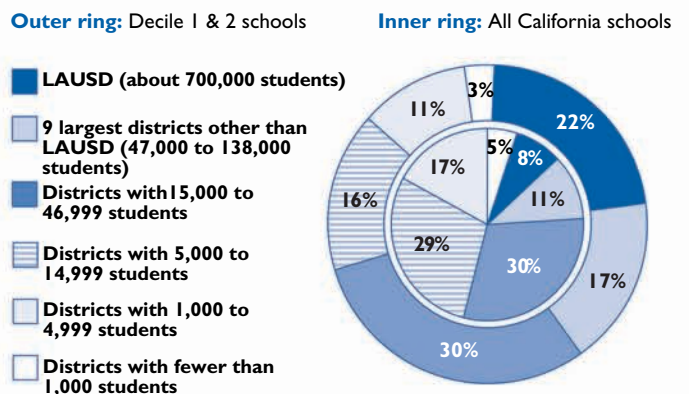
More important, perhaps, than the fact that no single student characteristic was necessary for a school to be in Decile 1 or 2 is that none was sufficient. Robert Lane

Data: CDE-1999 Base API database

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Figure 3

1999 Distribution of Decile 1 & 2 schools among different-sized districts, compared to all schools



Data: CDE-1999 Base API database, CBEDS

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Elementary in Los Angeles, for example, had a 90% Hispanic student population and achieved test scores high enough to be in Decile 8 in 1999, as did Lincoln Elementary in Oakland, with 79% of its population English learners. In Inglewood, in Los Angeles County, Hudnall Elementary was a Decile 8 school despite 97% of its students participating in the free/reduced price lunch program, and Kelso Elementary was in Decile 10 although 89% of its students participated.

The high correlation among these factors further complicates any attempt to draw conclusions about what causes low student performance. For example, English learners are likely to be Hispanic and poor, white students are less likely to be English learners, and so on. In addition, although coming from an impoverished background does not prevent many individuals and immigrant groups from achieving school success, poverty still stands out as more predictive of low school performance than other factors.

Thus, while it is inaccurate to say that student characteristics alone cause schools to have low API scores, it is true that most of the schools in California with the lowest scores also serve the highest proportions of English learners and children in poverty and have the lowest proportion of white students.

Students' EL status affects school performance

California requires all students to take the state's standardized tests, even those who are classified as non-English proficient. The API calculation does not include scores for a

school district's newest arrivals, so schools have generally had one year to teach any student whose score is counted, including English learners (EL).

Students are designated as English learners based on two factors. The first is if their primary language, as reported to the local school by their parents, is not English. The second is their performance on an English proficiency test that educators use to determine whether they have the English language skills to succeed in a school's regular instructional program. The tests are given annually as students are learning English, with the goal that students will eventually be re-designated as "fluent English proficient."

The California Department of Education (CDE) language census reports that, since 1998–99, between 8% and 9% of English learners have been reclassified annually as fluent English proficient. At that point they are no longer counted as EL students. As a result, the data on EL performance consistently understates these students' achievement growth.

Despite state officials' efforts to standardize the assessment schools use, the reclassification process is far from cut and dried. In 2001 all California school districts began using the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) for this purpose. State officials recommend the level of performance on the CELDT that warrants possible reclassification, but the test is just one of several factors local school districts are to consider.

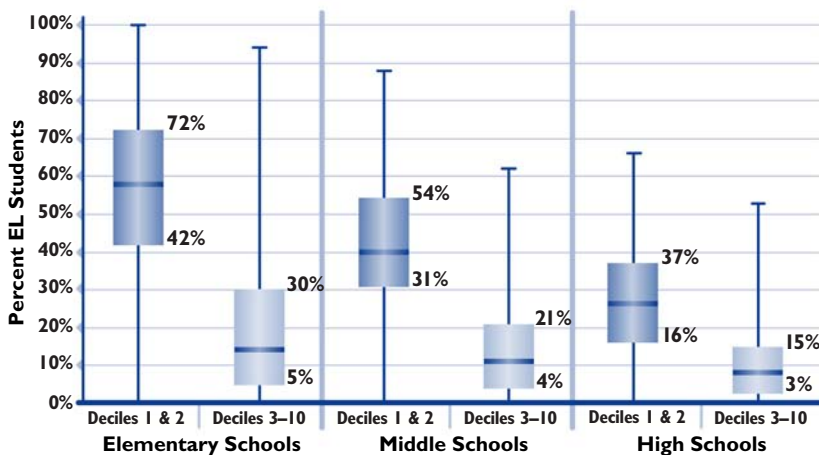
The task of teaching English learners is further complicated by the many different primary languages students speak and by variations in their fluency and literacy in their primary language. For example, students from some parts of Mexico and Latin America have had an education in Spanish, while those coming from rural Mexico and Central America may have had no schooling at all. Similar differences can be seen with other language groups as well. The net result is that both within and among schools, EL students vary greatly in their readiness to learn how to speak, write, and read English. And schools vary greatly in the challenges they face in helping students learn. One school with 50% EL students may look very different from another.

Overall, the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools tended to have a high percentage of students who were English learners (ELs). (See Figure 4.) For the schools as a whole the median was 52%, with the proportions highest at the elementary level and lowest at high school. The comparison with Decile 3–10 schools shown in Figure 4 further demonstrates the

Figure 4

1999 Concentration of EL students in Deciles 1 & 2 versus Deciles 3–10 for all school levels

At all grade levels, 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools tended to have far more EL students than 1999 Decile 3–10 schools.



Note: "Boxes" represent the middle half for a given group of schools, and the thin vertical lines, or "whiskers," represent the entire range of values. The dark horizontal line marks the value at the median school.

Data: CDE–1999 Base API database

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impact EL students have on a school's API at all grade levels. In all of California in 1999, just 15% of schools had student populations that were more than half EL students. About two-thirds of them (or 711) were Decile 1 & 2 schools.

Those familiar with the struggles that English learners face in taking standardized tests in English are not likely to find these results surprising. However, the prevalence of English learners in the lowest-performing schools is less pronounced than some other student characteristics, in particular the concentration of Hispanic students and those living in poverty.

Ethnicity varies dramatically between Decile 1 & 2 schools and others

Student ethnicity in California is a patchwork that includes substantial proportions of various ethnic groups and no clear majority. Whites and Hispanics are the largest segments. The sheer numbers in both groups mean that they are much more likely to be the dominant segment of a school than either African Americans or Asians. Each of those groups represents less than 10% of the total student population in the state, and the median school had about 4% for each group. These basic demographics are important to keep in mind as one looks at how schools vary in their ethnicity. (See Figure 1 on page 2.)

White students made up about 38% of California's students generally. Yet the typical 1999 Decile 1 or 2 school had almost no white students. The median school had less than 5% white students. In nearly a quarter (24%) of the Decile 1 & 2 schools, white students made up less than 1% of the total student population. By contrast, among Decile 3–10 schools, the median school had a white population of 51%.

On the other hand, the proportion of Hispanic students at the typical 1999 Decile 1 or 2 school was markedly high. The median school had a Hispanic population of 77%, while among Decile 3–10 schools the median school was just 25% Hispanic. Further, eight out of 10 of the Decile 1 & 2 schools had a student body that was more than half Hispanic. These numbers were far greater than for California schools as a whole. In 1998–99 approximately 41% of California's students were Hispanic. Fewer than one in eight Decile 1 & 2 schools had a Hispanic population that was below that statewide figure.

Due in part at least to the small portion of California's student population that is African American, the percentage of these students in most schools was relatively low. The middle half of Decile 1 & 2 schools ranged from 1% to 17%. However, some were notable for their concentration of African American students. More than 11% of the lowest-performing schools had a student population that was over one-third African American.

The same statistical dynamics are at work for Asian students, but the relationship between the concentration

of these students and school performance is somewhat different. The data show an under-representation of Asian students in Decile 1 & 2 schools, with the middle half ranging from 0% to 5%. Conversely, they are more often found in Decile 3–10 schools, with the range of the middle half from 2% to 10%.

Student poverty and parent education level correlate with low performance

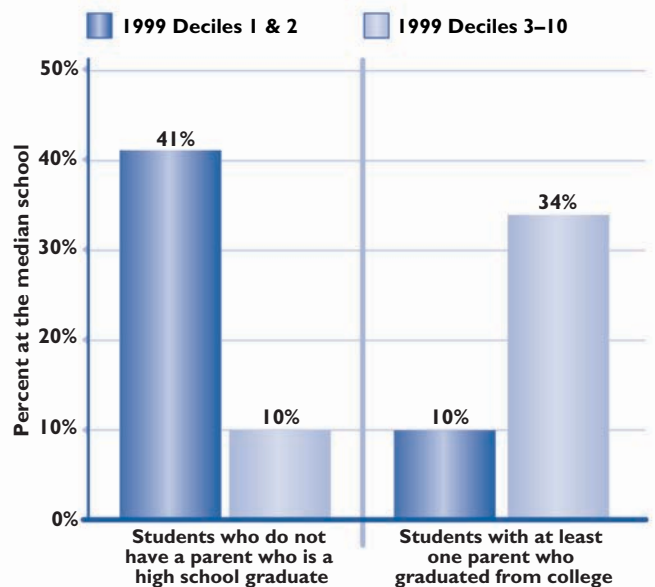
Students' socioeconomic status (SES) is often seen as having the strongest correlation with low academic performance. It generally includes both measures of poverty and parent education. The statistics related to the Decile 1 & 2 schools bear out the strength of these correlations.

Generally, school and government officials use student enrollment in the National School Lunch Program, which provides free and reduced-price meals, as the proxy measure of student poverty, even though this approach does have limitations. To be eligible for the program, family income must be less than 1.85 times the federal poverty limit. Families must apply for the program, and it is generally believed to be under-subscribed at the high school level where eligible students may not participate due to a perceived social stigma attached to the program. In California in 1999, the enrollment level declined as students got older. The median schools had students enrolled in the meal programs at

Figure 5

1999 Parent education levels at the median schools in Deciles 1 & 2 versus Deciles 3–10

The parents of students at 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools tended to have substantially less formal education than those at 1999 Decile 3–10 schools.



Data: CDE–1999 Base API database

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a rate of 55% in elementary schools, 44% in middle schools, and 27% in high schools.

These students had an extremely high representation in Decile 1 & 2 schools. In the median Decile 1 & 2 school, 88% of students were enrolled in the program, compared to the median school in Deciles 3 through 10 in which 39% were enrolled. In more than 95% of the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools, more than half of the students were enrolled in the lunch program.

In the typical 1999 Decile 1 & 2 school, students' parents did not have high levels of formal education. Whether this is measured by the percent of students whose highest-educated parent was not a high school graduate or by the

Student mobility disrupts schools and is hard to track

In developing the API, state leaders felt it would be unfair to hold a school accountable for the achievement of students in attendance at that school a relatively short time. As a result, a school's API has excluded the test scores of students who were in the school's district for less than a year. Consequently, this report does not discuss the impact of student mobility on school performance. It is nonetheless often cited as a factor that disrupts schools' effectiveness, and some schools report that half or more of their student body changes during the course of a typical school year. (In 2002 state law was changed so student scores would be counted only if they were in a district in the fall of the same school year. Recent federal legislation may require further modifications.)

More data are needed on school administrators

School site principals in general, and their level of management experience in particular, can be a key factor in school performance.

The only readily available statewide data regarding school principals' experience, however, are related only to overall educational experience. Thus, a school principal who was a teacher for five years and a principal for 10 is indistinguishable from a principal who was a teacher for 15 years and is just starting as a principal. As a result, these data masked how long each school's principal had been in an administrative role. Similarly, data are available for how long a principal has been in a school district (as an administrator and/or teacher) but not for how long a principal has been at the helm of an individual school.

Because of these limitations, school-level administrator data are not included in this analysis.

percent whose parent was at least a college graduate, the gap is clear. As Figure 5 shows, the difference between Decile 1 & 2 and Decile 3–10 schools was dramatic.

What were the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools like?

While the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools stood out in terms of the students they served, they were also distinctive from Decile 3–10 schools in other ways. They tended to be larger than average and were much more likely to be on a multi-track, year-round calendar. In terms of staffing, they had a much higher proportion of teachers who were less than fully credentialed and were also more likely to have a high percentage of first- and second-year teachers.

Enrollments tended to be large

In California in 1999, Decile 1 & 2 elementary and middle schools tended to be large. With 736 students, the median elementary school was nearly one third larger than its counterpart in Decile 3–10. (See Figure 6.) The difference was somewhat less stark for middle schools. Among high schools, the largest of the lowest-performing schools are considerably bigger than the largest of the Decile 3–10 schools, but the difference at the median actually narrowed to just 49 students.

The state's largest schools were disproportionately represented in Deciles 1 and 2. California has 378 elementary schools with more than 1,000 students, and more than half of them were among the lowest-performing schools. The same was true of 47 of the state's 88 middle schools with more than 1,500 students, and of 31 out of the 64 high schools with more than 3,000 students.

A school characteristic closely related to enrollment is the operation of a multitrack, year-round (MTYRE) calendar, under which schools are open all year but a portion of their student body is not in attendance at any given time. Typically schools use an MTYRE schedule in response to the problem of overcrowded facilities, making it likely that many 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools would be MTYRE schools because of their large size. About 44% of all multitrack, year-round schools were in Deciles 1 and 2 in 1999, more than double the 20% that would be predicted statistically.

Among Decile 3–10 schools, about one-tenth operated on this type of calendar compared to a third of all 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools. At the elementary level in particular, 377 schools—or about 40% of 1999 Decile 1 & 2 elementary schools—were year-round. Among the middle schools, 14% or 32 schools were on a year-round calendar, and half of those were in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). A total of just 30 high schools in California are on a MTYRE calendar, and 22 of them were in Deciles 1 and 2. All but four of those 22 schools were in LAUSD.

The connection of large and/or MTYRE schools with lower student performance is far from clear cut. In California, these schools tend to also be the ones that are in low-income communities and that are serving a rapidly growing and sometimes highly mobile population of children, including many English learners. As a result, it is difficult to assess the independent impact of school size or a year-round schedule on student performance.

Teacher qualifications varied with performance

Teacher quality is a critical component of schools' ability to teach students effectively and thus of students' ability to learn and to perform well on state tests. Two criteria are most commonly used to quantify teacher quality. The first is the certification teachers have earned, and the second is teachers' experience. The data show that while schools at all performance levels had some new, inexperienced teachers, the lowest-performing schools had more of them and were also more likely to have a large number of teachers who were less than fully credentialed. In 1999 the problem was most pronounced at elementary and middle schools and a bit less so at high schools. This can be largely explained by the impact that K-3 class size reduction had on the supply of qualified teachers in the late 1990s.

In comparison to schools statewide—and particularly to schools in Deciles 3 through 10—the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools tended to have a relatively large number of teachers who did not hold at least a preliminary credential in California. At the median Decile 1 & 2 school, nearly 21% of teachers were not fully credentialed compared to less than 6% at the median among Decile 3-10 schools. In almost 80% of the lower-performing schools, at least one out of 10 teachers was not fully credentialed. And in 22% of them, a third or more of the teaching staff did not have full credentials.

Some data show that teacher experience is even more important than credentials. The difference in teacher experience at the lowest-performing schools was also notable. At the median school, 12% of teachers were in their first two years and 41% were in their first five years. At the median among Decile 3-10 schools, 7% of teachers were in their first two years and 31% were in their first five years.

The performance of charter schools is an increasingly important question for K-12 education in California. Few charters, however, were included in the first API cycle, mostly because it did not include any schools with fewer than 100 students. The handful of charter schools that were in 1999 Deciles 1 and 2

have since performed at about the same levels as the rest of the group. Significant answers to most of the questions about charter school performance will remain elusive, particularly until the results of one or two more API cycles are seen.

District-level financial data provide little clarity regarding school-level spending

An important question is the level of resources available to the lowest-performing schools and the extent to which that correlates with student performance. However, the state systematically collects and reports financial data only for school districts, not schools. That includes data on the amount of funding districts receive from various sources, on how districts spend their funds, and on teachers' salaries. These financial data generally do little to clarify the relationship between money and school performance. However, they do provide some general information about the similarities and differences in resources available to school districts in California.

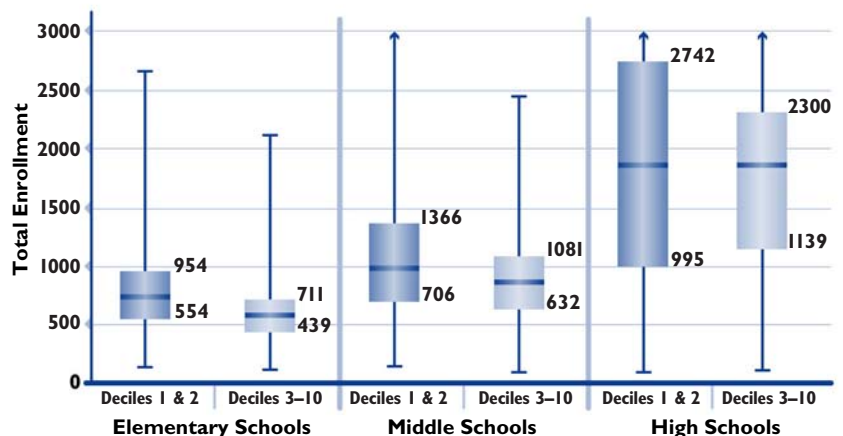
Revenues are set based on district type and to some degree on student characteristics

The largest portion of revenues goes to school districts as "general purpose money" based on the number of students in a district. This is called a district's "revenue limit" funding. This per-pupil amount varies by type of school district—elementary, unified, and high school—but it is relatively uniform within each type, thanks to the *Serrano v. Priest* court ruling in the late 1970s. As reported on the Education Data Partnership website (www.ed-data.k12.ca.us), the average

Figure 6

1999 Enrollment at Decile 1 & 2 versus Decile 3-10 schools

1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools tended to be larger than 1999 Decile 3-10 schools.



Note: "Boxes" represent the middle half for a given group of schools, and the thin vertical lines, or "whiskers," represent the entire range of values. (In some cases the extreme values in the range exceed the upper limit of the chart.) The dark horizontal line marks the value at the median school.

Data: CDE-1999 Base API database, CBEDS enrollment data

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revenue limit for each type of district in 1998–99, and the proportion of total revenues that represented, was as follows:

- Unified districts (grades K–12): \$3,900 per pupil and 66% of total revenues.
- High school districts (grades 9–12): \$4,600 per pupil and 73% of total revenues.
- Elementary districts (typically grades K–8): \$3,784 per pupil and 66% of total revenues.

School districts also receive a substantial portion of their funding through state and federal “categorical” programs. The amount of categorical money they receive depends on many factors. A large portion is based on the number of “special needs” students districts serve, but a substantial amount is earmarked for various programs a district operates that have little to do with student characteristics. Many of these are voluntary. Presumably, a school district serving high numbers of English learners or students in poverty qualifies for extra funds to run programs that meet the needs of those students. An extreme exam-

ple is Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). In 1998–99 the district received state revenues from categorical programs that totaled \$2,150 per pupil, compared to an average of \$1,344 in unified districts statewide. Federal categorical revenues added another \$445 per pupil, compared to the unified district average of \$332. The differences are based on the number and magnitude of programs that districts qualified for.

The revenue limit amounts and many categorical amounts are based on specific district formulas. As a result, state averages mask some substantial variations among school districts. Variations in available money affect how much the district has to spend. But local decision-making plays a part in how it is spent, including the amount allocated to teacher salaries.

District expenditure and salary data cannot be correlated with school performance

Schools in Deciles 1 and 2 in 1999 tended to be in districts that spent slightly more than the average amount per pupil, a fact that can be explained by the extra categorical funds they likely received. The district expenditure per pupil for the median Decile 1 & 2 school was almost \$5,500, while for the median Decile 3–10 school it was \$5,222. Each school was assigned its district average, with the acknowledgment that the average masks at times substantial differences in per-pupil expenditures from school to school within a district.

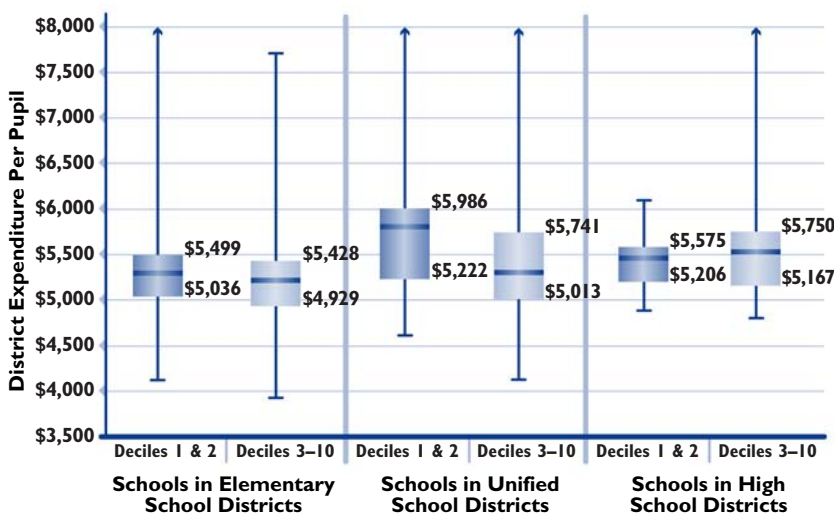
A more thorough look at expenditure data requires that it be based on the type of district, as shown in Figure 7. The data reflect district expenditures divided by the number of students in a district (based on Average Daily Attendance). It is also important to note that LAUSD skews the numbers somewhat among the unified districts, as its expenditures were \$5,986 per student and it had such a large number of schools in Deciles 1 and 2. Without LAUSD schools, the median unified district expenditure for a Decile 1 & 2 school was \$5,320 per pupil, while the same calculation for Decile 3–10 schools resulted in a median of about \$5,198 per pupil. While the Decile 1 & 2 schools tended to be in elementary and unified districts that spent a slightly higher amount, the opposite was true for the lowest-performing schools in high school districts.

The same calculation for teacher salaries reveals very small differences between the Decile 1 & 2 schools and

Figure 7

Average 1999 district expenditure per pupil for Decile 1 & 2 versus Decile 3–10 schools for all districts

For each district type, district-level expenditure data provided no clear distinctions between 1999 Decile 1 & 2 and Decile 3–10 schools. Differences may exist at the school level, but that data is not generally available. The difference in the median values for schools in unified districts is due mostly to the effect of the Los Angeles Unified School District, which has unusually high expenditures per pupil.



Note: “Boxes” represent the middle half for a given group of schools, and the thin vertical lines, or “whiskers,” represent the entire range of values. (In some cases the extreme values in the range exceed the upper limit of the chart.) The dark horizontal line marks the value at the median school. A small number of districts were not included due to inconsistencies in the data.

Data: CDE–1999 Base API database, Current Cost of Education database (1998–99)

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Decile 3–10 schools. Average teacher salary numbers do not necessarily indicate that one district pays better or worse than another because differences also reflect teacher experience levels. A district with a preponderance of new teachers will have a lower average teacher salary. Other important factors to consider when comparing teacher salaries include the difference in cost of living from one area to another, district size, and district type.

These limited financial data illustrate a challenge that is also addressed in a large body of research that examines the relationship between money and school performance. Based on work begun by Eric Hanushek in the 1970s and continuing today, experts have hotly debated this relationship and looked for data that would provide clearer information. In the case of California, the systematic collection and reporting of school-level financial data would help illuminate this issue.

Section 2

How can the progress of these schools best be evaluated?

In developing this EdSource report, the goal was first to identify how many 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools had met their growth targets over the past three years, then to determine which of them had done a particularly good job of improving student achievement as measured by the API. Second was an attempt to learn more about what conditions, practices, or policies could have contributed to the difference in performance. This effort may help tell both educators and policymakers what strategies are working so far and what circumstances have been hardest to overcome. To that end, EdSource did the following:

- Looked at the progress of all 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools through 2002;
- Established criteria for what would constitute “exemplary progress” among the Decile 1 & 2 schools as determined by the API, and identified the schools at each level that met those criteria;
- Identified a group of “Beating the Odds” schools that were similar to the majority of 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools in terms of the socioeconomic status of the students they served, but who were far more successful in terms of their initial API scores and have continued to do well;
- Learned more about these schools—how they were the same and how they differed—through data, a survey of the principals of both the Decile 1 & 2 and the Beating the Odds schools, and some interviews with school district officials.

To help put the findings in Section 3 of this report in perspective, brief explanations of these efforts follow.

EdSource set a high bar for identifying Decile 1 & 2 schools that made exemplary progress

To identify a group of 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools that made exemplary progress, EdSource examined the schools’ annual increases in API scores through 2002. This approach was taken with full awareness of the ongoing controversy about the value of the API index. Some critics have questioned the validity of the index, particularly when it is used to determine cut-off points for purposes of high-stakes consequences such as rewards and sanctions. And few would argue that the API measures all facets of school performance. Others, however, contend that even with its limitations, the API serves a purpose by keeping schools clearly focused on improving student test scores. Either way, the API remains the most concise and commonly used indicator of school performance and progress currently available in California.

In identifying the Exemplary Progress schools, EdSource set high API growth criteria with the hope that even critics of the API will see these criteria as rigorous enough to clearly indicate substantial improvement in students’ academic achievement. A 1999 Decile 1 & 2 school was deemed to have made “exemplary progress” if its schoolwide and subgroup API scores grew consistently and substantially over the three cycles as well as in each cycle. The minimum criteria for elementary schools were as follows:

- Cumulative schoolwide API growth over three growth cycles (sum of three individual cycles): 100 points or more;
- Schoolwide growth in each cycle: 30 points or more;
- Cumulative subgroup growth over three cycles: 80 points or more;
- Subgroup growth each cycle: 20 points or more.

Schools that had lower API growth may still have achieved meaningful improvement. For example, a school that showed huge API score growth in one year and did not show much progress the following year would not meet our criteria despite the possibility that the school improved its instruction and learning to a real extent.

Based on this benchmark, no high schools and only one middle school qualified as having made exemplary progress. To set a bar for highlighting those secondary schools that had done best, EdSource established somewhat less rigorous criteria in terms of the amount of growth for middle schools, and also the consistency of growth in all three API cycles for the high schools. Using these criteria, a handful of middle and high schools qualified as noteworthy.

Some schools have high numbers of students in poverty but beat the odds

Identifying schools that were similar in terms of student poverty levels to the Decile 1 & 2 schools, but have consis-

tently performed better, helped illuminate what factors have the most potential impact on school operations and improvement. These “Beating the Odds” schools were selected based on their students’ socioeconomic status alone because, among all the student characteristics that correlate with low academic performance, poverty is the most salient. Using a single factor also kept the identification of these schools straightforward and manageable. The schools selected were either:

- In the top 20% of the state in 1999 in terms of enrollment in the federal free/reduced price meal program; or
- In the top 20% of the state in 1999 in terms of the percent of students without a parent who graduated from high school and in the bottom 20% of the state for their

EdSource thanks expert reviewers

The EdSource staff thanks the research experts at the American Institutes for Research (AIR), RAND, Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing (CRESST), and the California Department of Education (CDE) who reviewed and commented on the development of the criteria for our Exemplary Progress schools.

The EdSource Survey

In November 2002 EdSource sent a survey to the school principals at 968 elementary schools, 223 middle schools, and 180 high schools that were in Deciles 1 and 2 according to California’s 1999 API ranking. The survey also went to the schools identified as “beating the odds” because they serve highly challenged student populations and still perform among the top half of schools statewide. Principals were encouraged to fax their responses or complete the surveys online at the EdSource website.

A total of 101 elementary principals voluntarily completed the surveys, including:

- 86 from 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools, of which 28 met the EdSource criteria for exemplary progress on the API and 58 did not;
- 15 out of the 26 Beating the Odds schools.

In addition, 22 middle school principals and 31 high school principals returned surveys.

The survey results provide a limited perspective on what is changing in schools because they only ask the question of principals. It is likely that teachers would respond differently to many of the questions explored in this report.

school type in 1999 in terms of the students’ average parent education level. (To ensure validity, only schools with at least 80% response rates on the parent education question were included based on this criterion.)

The final qualification was that the schools had to have valid API scores for all three base years. A total of 1,104 elementary schools fit all these criteria. The ones then designated as “beating the odds” were those that ranked in Decile 6 or above in 1999 and for each subsequent ranking. Throughout the state, 26 elementary schools fit all these criteria and made the EdSource list of Beating the Odds schools. (Because only a very small number of middle and high schools did so, they are considered separately.)

Although similar in terms of student poverty, these schools varied in some notable ways from the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 elementary schools. For example, only two of the 26 had more than 80% Hispanic students, a figure that was at the median among the Decile 1 & 2 schools. While for the most part heavily nonwhite, the Beating the Odds schools did have a somewhat higher proportion of white students as well. They were also more likely to have a relatively high proportion of Asian students, with eight of them being more than half Asian. However, the proportion of EL students was similar to that of the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools.

More notable than the differences in student ethnicity were the school characteristics of the Beating the Odds schools in comparison to the Decile 1 & 2 schools. For example, the proportion of teachers who were fully credentialed was much closer to elementary schools in general than to the elementary schools in Deciles 1 and 2. Out of the 26 schools, 16 had 88% or more fully credentialed teachers in 1999. In regard to school size, all but four of them were smaller than the Decile 1 and 2 median of 736 students. In addition, 10 of the 26 served 450 or fewer students, and not one had more than 1,000. Four of the schools, just 15%, were on a multitrack, year-round schedule as opposed to 38% of the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 elementary schools.

The 26 Beating the Odds schools came from throughout California but were most likely to be in urban areas. They represent 13 different counties, only three of which would be considered rural: Placer, Imperial, and Humboldt. Eight of the schools are in Los Angeles County, with four in LAUSD and three in Inglewood Unified. A total of four schools are in San Francisco Unified School District, three are in Sacramento Unified, and two are in Evergreen Elementary School District in Santa Clara County.

Survey responses provide perspective on effective policies and practices

Identifying schools that did well on a measure such as the API is far simpler than explaining why they improved. Researchers have found that schools that boast good stu-

dent performance despite substantial challenges commonly employ certain educational practices. State policy activity in California since 1999 has supported some of these practices. In most cases, data are not available to measure schools' implementation of the policies or their direct effect on student progress. Thus, EdSource sent an informal survey to the principals of the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools and to those identified as "beating the odds." The survey asked about how they operate, the challenges they face, and their efforts at improvement.

While the response rate for the survey was about 10% and thus too small to be able to draw firm conclusions, the respondents were generally representative of the population of 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools in terms of school size, API score, teacher credentialing, and student characteristics. The principals' perceptions shared on the surveys add to the limited site-level data available. (See the box on page 12 for additional information about the EdSource survey.) EdSource staff also interviewed a group of school district officials in LAUSD, where the group of Exemplary Progress schools was large enough to provide some potential explanations.

With both the survey and interviews, the goal was to learn whether those schools that have improved most differ in their operation from schools that have shown less improvement. And if so, are those changes consistent with what has been happening at the Beating the Odds schools as well? Finally, are there lessons here for school leaders and policymakers?

Section 3

What has happened to the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools?

Much has changed in the three years since California launched its accountability system. At the time the Public School Accountability Act (PSAA) was passed in April 1999, the state had a new governor and a robust economy. State leaders were challenged to find responsible ways to spend growing amounts of revenue.

From 1999 to 2001, the state moved ahead with systems for rewarding schools that had improved and intervening in schools that fell into the bottom half of the API ranking and had failed to improve. Based on the overall progress of a school's student body on the standardized tests students took each spring (as calculated using the API index), many schools received extra funds. The accountability system included the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP) to give extra support to low-performing schools and the Governor's Performance Award program to reward schools that were improving. Additional reward programs in 2000 provided further incentives around improvement.

In the first year of the II/USP, the California Department of Education (CDE) selected 168 Decile 1 & 2 schools to

participate. All schools in the lower half of performance based on student test scores were eligible to apply for the program, and 430 were selected to participate the first year. In 2002–03, after this first group of schools had gone through two years implementing a state-approved improvement plan, the State Board of Education determined their success. Among the 168 Decile 1 & 2 schools:

- 38 will exit the program because they met their growth targets during both improvement years.
- Another 125 made some progress but not enough to exit the program. These will continue to be II/USP schools, and those that were in Decile 1 as of 2000 will also be included in the state's High Priority Schools Grant program, which provides additional support.
- Two schools face sanctions for not having made any API growth in either implementation year. The State Board of Education (SBE) can decide to: 1) have the state assume control of the school, reassign the principal, and assign management of the school to an appropriate entity (e.g., a county board of education); or 2) require the school to work with an assistance team.
- The outcomes for three schools are uncertain because they do not have complete API data.

A large portion of the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools also received Governor's Performance Awards some time during the three years. And at 76 of these schools—including 13 middle schools and 10 high schools—the teaching staffs received cash bonuses of \$5,000 to \$25,000 per person in 2000–01 based on their schools' performance.

The continuation of these investments in California's school accountability system is in question as the state faces a multibillion dollar deficit at the beginning of 2003. The record of progress over the prior three years and a clear view of what actions made the greatest impact for those schools most in need of improvement could help guide the difficult spending decisions the state now faces. The American Institutes for Research (AIR) is currently evaluating the effectiveness of the PSAA programs, with the assistance of EdSource and Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). The results of this evaluation will be available in the summer of 2003.

Decile 1 & 2 schools made steady progress on the API

The API system measures growth in two ways, the actual increase in the score and the meeting of a state-set growth target. Over the course of the three years that California has been operating its school accountability system, the average API scores for all schools have risen, with the progress of elementary schools most notable. In addition, the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools have made greater point gains than the schools in the original Deciles 3 through 10. They have done less well, however, at meeting their growth targets. (See Figure 8.)

The state sets API growth targets for schools based on an expected gain of 5% between their base API and the statewide target of 800. Every significant subgroup of students (based on socioeconomic status and ethnicity) is expected to show an improvement of at least 80% of the schoolwide target.

About a third of the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools have met their schoolwide growth targets all three years, 29% have met all their annual subgroup targets, and 25% have done both. It is important to note that because larger schools are likely to have more student subgroups, they can also have a harder time making sure all those groups reach their targets.

Looking at the actual scores helps illustrate the progress these schools have made. In 1999 the group's API scores ranged from 297 to 523, and just 5% had an API above 500. In the fall of 2002, schools received their 2002 Growth API scores. The group's scores now ranged from 268 to 718, and 82% had a score higher than 500. The median 2002 Growth API score was 548, and nearly 16% of the schools scored above 600. Schools only receive a decile ranking

with their Base API scores, but if the 2002 Growth API scores were used to rank schools, 9% of high schools, 14% of middle schools, and 17% of elementary schools from the original 1999 Decile 1 & 2 group would now be ranked in Decile 3 or above.

These signs of progress provide some cause for optimism. However, given the relative newness of the API system, it is difficult to know if the improvement can be sustained or if even greater improvements can reasonably be expected. If local schools can continue to focus on curriculum and instructional improvements—and put resources toward that effort—will the progress accelerate?

Middle and high schools have lagged behind

A more detailed look at the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools—by amount of improvement and type of school—illustrates that their progress has been far from uniform. As noted above, schools vary significantly in the extent to which their API scores increased. Further, as was the case statewide, the elementary schools in the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 group raised their API scores dramatically in comparison to middle and high schools. Figure 9 shows how the three types of schools compared in 2001–02. These differences were consistent with the results from the previous two years.

Some elementary schools made exemplary progress

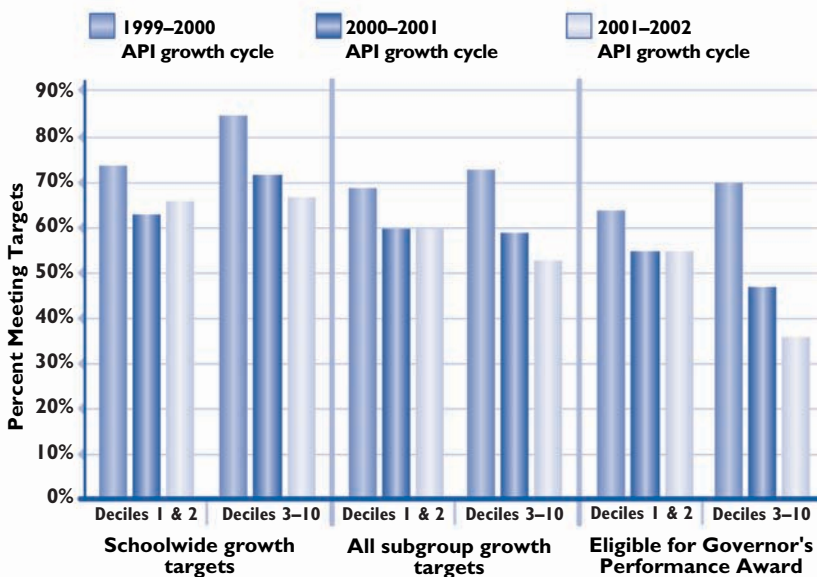
Among the 968 Decile 1 & 2 elementary schools, a total of 109, or about 11%, met the EdSource criteria for exemplary progress. (See page 11.) No high schools and only one middle school fully met the criteria, but a handful met a somewhat lower but still noteworthy threshold. This report looks at their progress separately.

From a statistical standpoint, if the Exemplary Progress elementary schools vary at all from the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 elementary schools as a whole, they faced slightly greater challenges. On average, they are either similar or even more challenged by large populations of English learners and students living in poverty. Many serve a heavily Hispanic student population. School sizes are modestly larger. The proportion of fully credentialed teachers is somewhat lower. They do not differ, on average, when it comes to teacher experience levels. And they were no more likely than their lower-performing counterparts to be participants in the state's Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP).

Figure 8

Annual progress of 1999 Decile 1 & 2 versus Decile 3–10 schools based on state targets

In the 1999–2000 API growth cycle, schools that started in Deciles 1 and 2 fared worse than those in Deciles 3 through 10 in terms of meeting PSAA targets. In the next two cycles—after the growth requirement was strengthened for schools with scores of 711 or greater—the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools fared better than their counterparts in terms of both subgroup growth targets and Governor's Performance Award eligibility.



Note: For information on schoolwide and subgroup growth targets, see the box on page 4.

Data: CDE-API databases

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Perhaps the most striking feature of the 109 elementary schools is the district in which most are located. Specifically, 75 of them are in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). That means that seven of every 10 schools that met the standard that EdSource set for exemplary API growth were in LAUSD. The district accounted for 230 or about 24% of the original 1999 Decile 1 & 2 elementary schools and about 8% of all elementary schools statewide. Thus, LAUSD had a disproportionate share of schools in Deciles 1 & 2 in 1999, but also had a greatly disproportionate share of the schools that have shown exemplary progress on the API since then.

The 34 other Exemplary Progress elementary schools came proportionately from school districts of all sizes:

- Eight were from the other nine largest districts;
- 11 were from districts of between 15,000 and 47,000 students; and
- 15 were from districts serving fewer than 15,000 students.

A curriculum-based focus seems to make a difference in elementary schools

When educators and researchers address the question of why student achievement improves, they consistently see many of the answers centered in the classroom—in the curriculum materials teachers have available and their skill in using those materials effectively. Most school improvement experts believe that a key part of maximizing teachers' efforts is for schools to adopt a unified, well-integrated curriculum and instructional approach. This schoolwide focus means that all teachers are using the same books, have had the same training, share a common set of expectations for student performance, and use the same methods to assess student progress and help students who are having trouble. When all the teachers at a school are focused on shared, consistent goals and methods, they can also learn from each other and mutually support continued improvement.

California's reading adoption process has taken several years

Increasingly since the mid-1990s, California state leaders have centered policy activities and resources on encouraging schools statewide to take this kind of concerted approach to instruction. This is particularly true at the elementary level. In June 1999, the California State Board of Education (SBE) completed an interim adoption of instructional materials for grades K–8 in both English language arts and math. In English language arts this included several different sets of texts. The state also provided extra funds to school districts so they could buy these materials.

Then, in January 2002, the board completed the official adoption of standards-based materials for kindergarten through 6th grade reading/language arts/English language development. These materials were consistent with a “direct instruction” approach as envisioned in the state's curriculum

frameworks. Generally this approach provides a ready-made, scripted instructional method designed specifically for the chosen curriculum, tools to facilitate that method, and training in the use of those tools. The board selected two programs, Houghton Mifflin Reading: A Legacy of Literacy and SRA/Open Court Reading from publisher SRA/McGraw-Hill. In addition, the state initiated professional development programs that some schools have used to train their teachers. The University of California Office of the President reports that 57% of schools and 78% of districts have had at least some teachers participate since 1999.

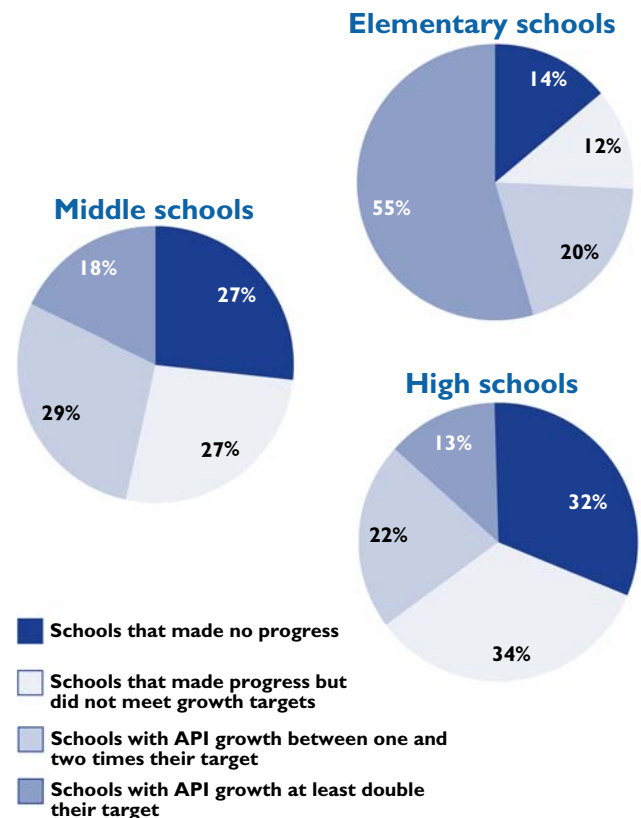
A schoolwide focus can make a difference

As a result of this two-step adoption process—and of the time it generally takes to make instructional changes in schools—the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools and the Beating the Odds schools vary widely in the extent to which they have implemented the state's expectations for curriculum and instruction. While this process is still ongoing, the

Figure 9

1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools' performance growth by grade level in 2001–02

The 2001–02 growth cycle was typical in regard to the disparity in progress by grade level—middle and high schools fared far worse than elementary schools.



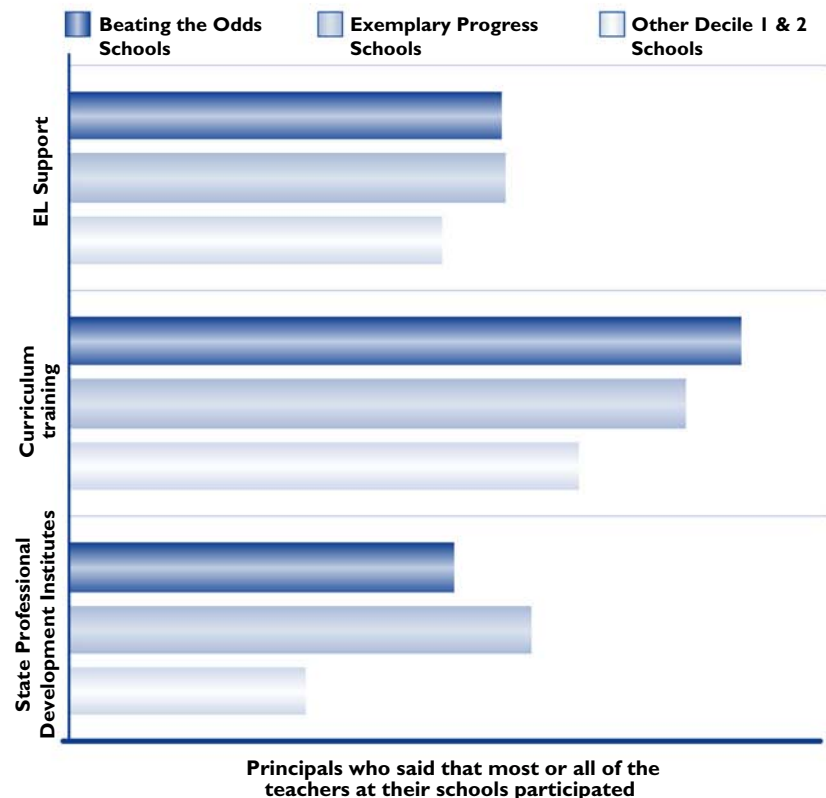
Data: CDE-API databases

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Figure 10 *EdSource Survey Results*

“In 2001–02, how many of your teaching staff had participated in various kinds of professional development?”

Principals at Exemplary Progress elementary schools and those that were beating the odds were more likely to report that most or all teachers had participated in curriculum-specific professional development programs, including the state-funded Professional Development Institutes.



Note: Due to the small size of the sample, survey results should not be considered precise. These charts are meant to give a sense of principals’ responses. Specific numeric values are not given.

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progress made by the three groups of schools, along with their responses on the EdSource survey, suggests that an integrated, schoolwide focus can make a difference at schools that serve the most challenging populations.

A total of 28 (out of 109) principals at Exemplary Progress schools returned the EdSource survey. All 28 had adopted a specific schoolwide reading instruction program: 21 were using Open Court, three were using Houghton Mifflin, and four were using various other programs. The preponderance of schools were from LAUSD, which began phasing in Open Court in 1999–2000 and adopted the program districtwide in 2001–02. The district also participated heavily in professional development efforts that trained teachers specifically on the use of these curriculum materials.

Of the 58 Decile 1 & 2 schools with principals who responded to the survey but that did not make exemplary progress, 49 also reported adopting schoolwide reading programs. About one third said they used Open Court, slightly fewer had adopted Houghton Mifflin, and the rest mentioned a variety of programs.

The 15 Beating the Odds schools with principals who responded were also nearly unanimous in their adoption of some specific schoolwide curriculum program for reading instruction, but only five specified Open Court. Among the 10 who reported on when they had adopted their program, half did so in 1998 or earlier and the other half in 2000–01 or later.

The state’s direct-instruction strategy has had some positive effects amid mixed reviews

Can a textbook adoption alone account for differences in schools’ success with challenging student populations? While there seems to be much more at work here, it appears that LAUSD’s districtwide adoption of the direct-instruction approach has made a difference for at least 75 of the district’s 230 lowest-performing schools. It is important to note, however, that the program has not been sufficient—in and of itself—to help every school perform at the same high levels. There are some LAUSD elementary schools where there has been no progress on the API whatsoever.

Direct instruction provides one way of integrating curriculum and focusing teaching methods with tools and training. A conversation with district-level officials at LAUSD helped to illuminate the dynamics they believe are at work in those schools that made the EdSource list for exemplary progress. They noted, for example, that the 75 schools were among those that had most fully implemented the elements of the state’s recommended direct-instruction approach, in this case through Open Court. For example, Aldama Elementary began using the program three years ago and saw its API increase from 456 to 633 in that time.

Beyond being a set of instructional materials, Open Court as implemented in LAUSD has provided a focus for changing teacher practice, leadership dynamics, and staff culture at many schools. LAUSD officials said that in the low-performing schools that are improving, teachers are working together

differently, with greater teamwork, regular meetings, and increased professional support for each other. Central to this change, they believe, has been the district's expectation that every teacher would take part in training on how to use the new instructional materials. More than 28,000 teachers in LAUSD participated in state-supported professional development that took from three to five days.

After that basic training, the district also provides ongoing coaching to teachers. District officials believe that LAUSD may be using teacher coaching more extensively than any other district. All LAUSD elementary schools have at least one reading and math coach. Each of LAUSD's 11 sub-districts has a coaching coordinator who oversees the school-level coaches. These coordinators meet weekly in the district's central office to learn from each other and implement successful strategies districtwide.

Continued professional development is critical to additional improvement at schools that have made progress, LAUSD officials say. They point to South Park Elementary as a case in point. This school has actively embraced many district reforms and has seen substantial increases in its API annually. But getting to a higher level of implementation will require a more sophisticated understanding of how, for example, to take an Open Court lesson and specifically teach it with strategies for English learners. Open Court, with its directed approach to reading instruction and professional development, has been a subject of controversy in LAUSD and elsewhere in California. Experienced, skilled teachers in particular have complained about the prescriptive nature of the program and its resulting tendency to inhibit them from using their own professional judgment and adapting instruction to individual student needs. Further, the progress noted here was specifically among the lowest-performing schools, not schools generally. EdSource does not have data on the effects of direct-instruction programs such as Open Court on all elementary schools in California.

LAUSD district officials said that teacher concerns were more prevalent when the program started, but they believe that the substantial gains in student achievement have blunted much of the criticism they heard initially. They say that as teachers have gained competence and confidence—and have seen students' growth—attitudes toward Open Court have grown more positive. "We're not just using a reading program but a real tool to help kids learn to read," one official said. "In our first year, we had many letters coming in expressing dissatisfaction and a lack of confidence. The following year, we received many letters offering testimonials."

Schoolwide reforms and professional development help school performance

Direct instruction in reading is not the only or perhaps even the central ingredient in the improvement of many

schools. For one thing, in order to raise their API, schools must improve mathematics scores as well. What does appear as a common thread is the schoolwide focus on student achievement and high expectations, which in turn involves teacher professional development tied to specific curriculum plus ongoing support for teachers as professionals and learners. Some schools began developing this focus using other whole-school reform or curriculum models. These efforts were not necessarily the intervention programs that were part of the PSAA system, such as the II/USP and a federal grant program called Comprehensive School Reform (CSR).

Among the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 elementary schools, a total of 51 received CSR grants in 1998 or 1999, and 12% of them met the EdSource criteria as Exemplary Progress schools. In addition, 125 Decile 1 & 2 elementary schools were part of the state's II/USP. Of these, just 5% met the EdSource criteria for exemplary progress.

In the EdSource survey, principals were asked to indicate what type of professional development their teachers had participated in and how widespread that participation was. The responses (see Figure 10) seem to indicate that those elementary schools experiencing the greatest success are generally more likely to have provided curriculum-based professional development to most or all of their teachers.

Confounding the eternal search for "a solution" to low-performing schools, however, is the reality that the improvements that result from schoolwide efforts and activities such as professional development are not universal. Some higher-achieving schools did not participate in these activities, and many of those that have failed to make substantial progress did.

Principals seem to make a difference when they work as instructional leaders

School leadership is often described as a central component of any effective school improvement effort. As an instructional leader, the principal monitors both teacher and student performance, and establishes a vision for the school. Among elementary principals responding to the EdSource survey, principals at Beating the Odds schools were much more likely to report that they spent more than half their time on instructional issues. Among the 15 that responded, 11 said they spent at least 60% of their time on instructional issues. The same was true for only eight out of 27 principals at the Exemplary Progress schools and 13 out of the 58 principals at the rest of the Decile 1 & 2 schools. Schools and principals might benefit if both school districts and the state looked at the administrative demands placed on school principals and at ways to help them become more effective in their jobs.

In terms of how principals said they allocate the time they spend on instructional issues, they were most likely to be ob-

servicing teachers and monitoring student performance. Activities focused on whole-school change—such as working on a school improvement plan or researching effective programs—were less common uses of their time.

Other factors raise interesting questions that warrant further exploration

Teacher work patterns and attitudes vary

The quality and motivation of the teaching force are always at the center of any discussion of school improvement, and that is particularly true when schools are struggling. Since 1999 California has enacted some state policies intended to improve the qualifications of teachers at the lowest-performing schools, among which the Decile 1 & 2 schools would likely be considered the most in need. Specifically, the state put \$100 million into a number of programs designed to encourage qualified teachers to work in the bottom half of schools (as determined by the API). These policies were enacted in the summer of 2000. From the data available as of 2001–02, this policy had not greatly affected the credential statistics for teachers in the Decile 1 & 2 schools as a group. The dramatic over-representation of less than fully credentialed teachers in these schools persisted.

Concurrent with the problem of not fully credentialed teachers, many struggling schools also report a high level of

staff turnover. The EdSource survey results indicate that this may be less of a problem at those schools who were beating the odds before 1999, but it continues to present challenges for the entire group of 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools, whether or not they have improved on the API. (See Figure 11.)

District officials at LAUSD agree that teacher turnover can present a barrier for schools trying to improve. The rate of turnover is influenced by many factors, among them the provisions of union contracts. For example, after two years in LAUSD, teachers may choose the grade level they teach. When teachers exercise that right, the school is faced with both replacing that teacher at the original grade level and with re-training him or her at the new grade level. A high level of staff turnover can be particularly detrimental to a school's ability to develop and sustain the kind of schoolwide focus and culture that appears to be so important to improvement.

Consistent with several of the other teacher-oriented questions on the survey, principals at the Beating the Odds schools generally rated staff morale and cohesion substantially higher than the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools did.

As a whole, the findings about teachers raise a “chicken or egg” question. Do the Beating the Odds schools do better because they have more credentialed teachers, less teacher turnover, and higher teacher morale? Or are better-qualified teachers attracted to schools that have shown relatively strong performance? The answers to these complex questions are outside the scope of this report but are important to keep in mind as part of this comparison.

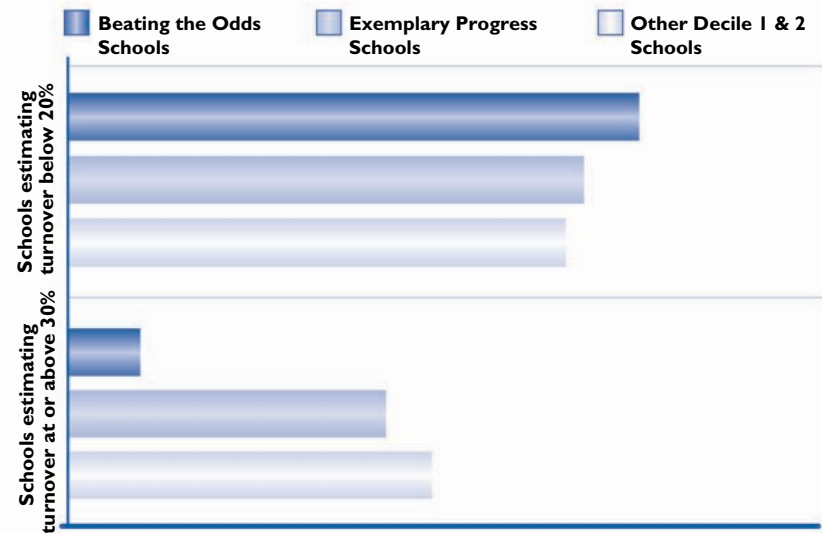
Another teacher-oriented factor in school effectiveness, however, seems to be the regularity with which teachers are able to meet and confer about students and their performance. The EdSource survey results indicated that both the Beating the Odds and Exemplary Progress schools were likely to meet in grade-level meetings at least biweekly, and virtually all met at least monthly. Only about half of the less-improved schools reported biweekly meetings, and about a 10th of the respondents said their staffs met only a few times a year or not at all. The occurrence of cross-grade-level meetings was much less common among all groups.

Interventions add instructional time

Along with adopting new textbooks and changing the way that schools and teachers go about their work, many school dis-

Figure 11 **EdSource Survey Results**
“From 1998–99 to 2001–02, what is your best estimate of the percent of turnover in your school’s teaching staff?”

Principals at Beating the Odds schools were much less likely to report teacher turnover rates at or above 30%.



Note: Due to the small size of the sample, survey results should not be considered precise. These charts are meant to give a sense of principals' responses. Specific numeric values are not given.

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districts are adding programs to provide extra support or encouragement to individual students. The EdSource survey gave principals the opportunity to describe the interventions they used most.

An almost universal intervention mentioned by principals, no matter what their school's performance, was the addition of before- or after-school instructional time. Interestingly, the Beating the Odds and Exemplary Progress schools were substantially more likely to also be retaining their students at benchmark grade levels if their performance was not up to acceptable standards. Extending the school year to provide more instructional time was less common among all three groups of schools, but least common for the less successful Decile 1 & 2 group.

According to district officials at LAUSD, much of the extra help given to struggling students there occurs as part of the regular school day. This requires the teacher to have the expertise and time to help individual children acquire needed skills. These opportunities are built into the Open Court program as independent work time for students. The teacher uses this time to provide targeted extra help either to individuals or small groups.

What gets in the way of elementary school progress?

The bar EdSource set for its Exemplary Progress schools was purposely high so the relatively small number of schools in that category is not unexpected. It is perhaps more notable that each year at least 45 of the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools made no progress or negative progress, and at least 87 more made between 0 and 15 points of progress. These were schools in the same cities and districts, often serving children from the same backgrounds. Some of them also adopted the same curriculum programs, had teachers with similar backgrounds, and had similar opportunities for professional development.

So what is known about the factors that may stand in the way of a school's ability to improve?

District officials in LAUSD are perhaps uniquely qualified to respond to this question as they have seen highly divergent results from schools that have most things in common. As one official put it, "The problems are very specific to school sites." In some cases, a school staff is trying to do too much and in the process is unable to develop and sustain coherence around its efforts. Personnel changes—whether in the principal's office, in classrooms, or among instructional staff such as teaching coaches—can take energy and focus away from the goal of higher student achievement. In LAUSD and many other districts, overcrowded and inadequate facilities also create barriers. When students have to travel long distances to get to schools that have room, their learning can be adversely affected.

"Sometimes the belief system around learning is a barrier," said one LAUSD official. "If a school's students have not done well for a long time, the culture of the school can decline."

In the EdSource surveys, principals added their own perspectives, in the process reinforcing many of the same points. Several respondents who wrote answers to the question of "what single factor serves as the biggest barrier" to hoped-for improvement mentioned problems associated with high teacher turnover. Others mentioned different teacher staffing issues, including attitude, ability, a lack of teamwork, and a lack of time for teachers to work together and develop the skills they need.

"We have not made the growth we would like," said Scott Turnbull, principal at Lehigh Elementary School in San Bernardino County. "I have been here since January 2002 and in that time my staff has identified meaningful teamwork as a critical missing link in our program."

More common among principals were mentions of the student factors they confront at their schools. Student mobility, poverty, and English learner status were all cited as barriers that have made it difficult for these schools to improve student achievement. As one Central Valley principal said, "Our transiency is a big factor—64%. We still continue to work on this and target our students, but it's hard when they move so frequently."

Chuck Holland, principal and superintendent at Holt Union, a one-school district in Stockton, described the extremes his school faces. "We have 95% free lunch and 95% EL students. Testing isn't going to help with this problem."

Lack of improvement at middle and high schools could have multiple causes

In California, middle schools and high schools have shown less improvement on the API than have elementary schools. (See Figure 9 on page 15.) Theories regarding their disappointing performance are plentiful, but clear evidence regarding its causes is much more rare.

From a purely statistical perspective, secondary schools often face different challenges than elementary schools do in attempting to meet their API growth targets. For example, the schools tend to be larger. Not only does that mean more staff and students, it can also change the statistical calculations of the API in regard to significant subgroups and their performance. Because the state defines any group of more than 100 students (based on socioeconomic status or ethnicity) as a significant subgroup, large schools are likely to have more groups, each of which must meet its target. Getting multiple subgroups of students to all improve achievement uniformly presents substantial challenges.

Another factor in the differential performance of the three school types could be the level of alignment between the cur-

ricula and the Stanford-9 test, upon which API scores were almost exclusively based through 2002. The Stanford-9 was more closely aligned to the elementary school curriculum than to that of middle and high schools because the test was based on a “consensus curriculum” reflecting many states’ standards. Because most states agree on what should be taught in the early grades, the Stanford-9 aligns well with California standards for early grades. States diverge on what should be taught in later grades. Therefore, the Stanford-9 is less likely to align with any state’s standards across the secondary curriculum.

In addition, the students now in California’s high schools—and middle schools to a somewhat lesser extent—have not had the full benefit of the state’s substantial investment in K–12 education since the mid-to-late 1990s. The class of 2004 began kindergarten in 1991 at a time when schools were drastically cutting budgets and programs. From an instructional perspective as well, the state has put more focus and made more progress in improving achievement in the earliest

grades. Effective strategies at middle and high school are not as clearly understood or as easily implemented, particularly with an age group that is also notorious for a lack of self-motivation.

Variations between high- and low-performing schools persist in secondary schools

For the most part, the student factors that differentiated all 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools from their Decile 3–10 counterparts were the same at elementary, middle, and high schools. These included students’ socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and status as English learners.

When it comes to school characteristics, Decile 1 & 2 high schools were more likely to have fully credentialed teachers than their elementary and middle school counterparts in 1999. That appears to be changing a bit, however. In 2001–02, the middle half of these high schools had between 27% and 12% not fully credentialed teachers, compared to 22% to 11% three years ago. The Decile 3–10 schools have not seen the same change in teacher qualifications. In addition, of the 30 year-round high schools in the state, 22 were in Deciles 1 and 2, compared to just eight in Deciles 3 through 10. Some multitrack, year-round schools offer less instructional time for students, and they also often have high percentages of English learners and low-income students.

High schools are the one portion of the public education system for which statewide achievement data beyond STAR test scores are readily available, although they are not factored into the API.

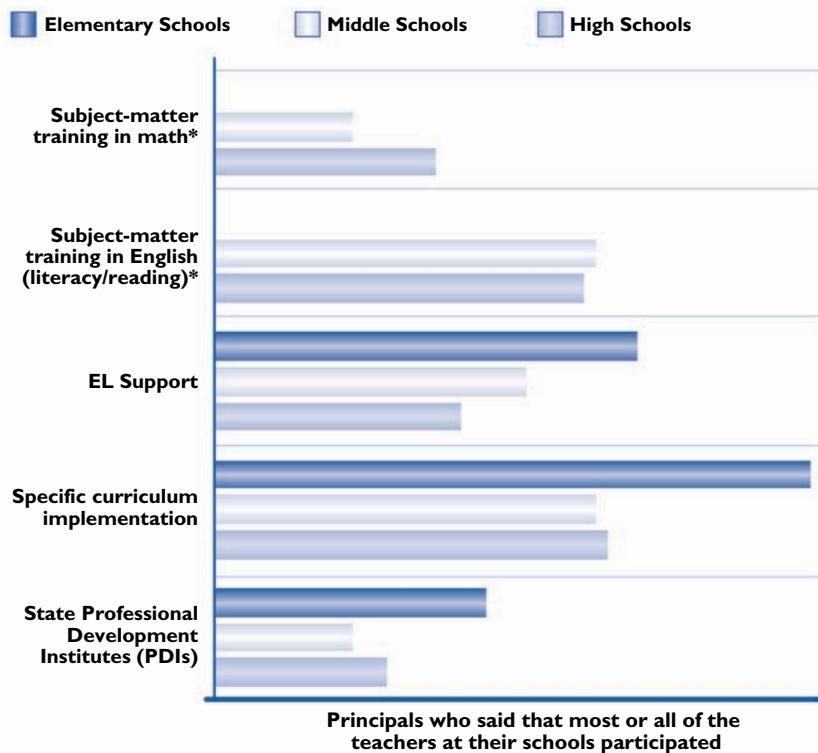
Currently of high interest in evaluating high school performance are UC/CSU eligibility rates. Students counted for this purpose are those who graduate having completed the comprehensive “a-g” course requirements that the state’s public universities require for admission. For the purposes of this report, EdSource calculated this rate by dividing the number of eligible graduates by a school’s total 12th grade enrollment. The comparison between the number of UC/CSU eligible graduates from 1999 Decile 1 & 2 and Decile 3–10 high schools follows:

- Percent eligible at median school: 23% versus 35%;
- Eligibility rate of less than 10%: at 10% versus 2% of schools;
- Eligibility rate at or near zero: at 5% versus 1% of schools.

Figure 12 *EdSource Survey Results*

“In 2001–02, how many of your staff had participated in various kinds of professional development?”

Principals in middle and high schools were much less likely than elementary schools to report that most or all of their teachers had participated in particular professional development activities.



Note: Due to the small size of the sample, survey results should not be considered precise. These charts are meant to give a sense of principals’ responses. Specific numeric values are not given.

* Not asked of elementary principals.

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High school and middle school principals who responded to the EdSource survey varied little from their elementary counterparts in most ways. (The respondents included 22 middle school and 31 high school principals.) The notable differences related to questions of teacher training and teamwork. They were substantially less likely than elementary principals to report that most or all of their teachers had participated in each of five specific areas of professional development. (See Figure 12.) They were also less likely to say that their staffs met biweekly. Only one-third of high school and about half of middle school principals held biweekly staff meetings.

From the API data for 1999 to 2002, few bright spots emerged about progress among middle and high schools. Of note, however, was performance data from a handful of schools, including four middle schools and four high schools that posted consistently better results than their counterparts. These schools were noteworthy for meeting the EdSource criteria for exemplary progress in two out of three years. (See the box on this page for an explanation of the middle and high school criteria.)

Of the four high schools that met EdSource's criteria for having made noteworthy progress, three were from the same district, El Monte Union High School District in Los Angeles County. This district operates five regular high schools, plus a continuation school. Its students are three-fourths Hispanic and about 5% white. Over one fourth are English learners and nearly two-thirds qualify for free/reduced price meals. Despite these odds, the district's schools have made noteworthy gains on the API. In particular, Arroyo, El Monte, and South El Monte high schools each gained more than 85 points over the three-year period. An interview with district officials provided information about their view of the schools' progress. (See the box on page 22 for a profile of this district's efforts.)

It is also notable that one middle school and eight high schools satisfied the EdSource criteria as Beating the Odds schools. These schools tended to have smaller enrollments than their 1999 Decile 1 & 2 counterparts, and in most of them the proportion of fully credentialed teachers was quite high.

Student reading ability and staff attitudes are keys to improvement

The survey responses of middle and high school principals stood out from those of their elementary counterparts in some interesting and potentially revealing ways. They mentioned the need to address student motivation around testing and standards, and they also focused on reading as the most critical student skill deficit, particularly at the high school level.

As one high school principal put it, "The biggest barrier to improving our school performance has been the low read-

Edsource determines criteria for middle and high school noteworthy progress

The middle school criteria for noteworthy progress were set at 80% of the level for elementary schools, both yearly and across the three API cycles, and for both schoolwide and subgroup targets. The minimum criteria for middle schools were as follows:

- Cumulative schoolwide API growth over three growth cycles (sum of three individual cycles): 80 points or more
- Schoolwide growth in each cycle: 24 points or more
- Cumulative subgroup growth over three cycles: 64 points or more

Subgroup growth each cycle: 16 points or more

The high school criteria were the same as those for middle schools, except that the individual cycle targets only needed to be met in two out of three cycles (the cumulative targets remained the same).

ing level of our entering freshmen." Another pointed to the strategies his school is using to address this issue. "We reached our API growth target this past year. I feel that the difference was twofold: 1) teachers discussed with students their individual scores before the test; and 2) our emphasis on reading. [Our school] has implemented reading as an elective for incoming 9th graders who read below the 6th-grade level. We also instituted a homeroom into the schedule, and all students and staff read for 20 minutes every day. Finally, students that scored low are required to attend an 8th-period reading class after school. In one word, we changed the culture of the school to READING."

In contrast to their elementary counterparts, several of the principals who responded to the survey were also more vocal about a need for change in terms of teacher attitude or ability. One principal pointed to "the belief by some teachers that someone else should teach literacy and it is not [their] job." He added that a schoolwide literacy program is gradually changing this attitude.

Another principal in a rural area said that the major barrier to improving test scores is "the willingness of the faculty to address the issue in a meaningful way. Courses have to be aligned to standards, delivery has to be standards-based, and assessments have to address mastery of the standards."

Conversely, several of the secondary school principals gave their staff credit for rising to new challenges. "The teachers have made great changes in classroom tactics, professional development, and working on improved instructional methods," said John White, principal of William Mulholland Middle School in Van Nuys. Another middle

El Monte Union High School District makes noteworthy progress

While achievement remains flat statewide for California high schools, one district in Los Angeles County stands out for the progress its schools are making.

El Monte Union High School District faces the challenges typical of Decile 1 & 2 schools: in 1999–2000 about 70% of its students received free/reduced price lunches and about 30% were English learners. In 2000–01, 26% of the teaching staff were not fully credentialed. Yet over the past three years, all five schools in the district have significantly improved their API scores. Three of the high schools—Arroyo, El Monte, and South El Monte—fit EdSource’s criteria for making “noteworthy progress.”

Nick Salerno, assistant superintendent for Educational Services, attributes his district’s success to its strong focus on literacy, academic standards development, and site leadership. El Monte Union HSD has also emphasized student accountability.

Student accountability starts early

At first glance, the district’s enrollment figures look skewed: in 2000–01, 4,347 students were freshmen, 2,578 were sophomores, 1,590 were juniors, and 1,185 were seniors. The reason for the heavy concentration in the lower grades, Salerno says, is a new district policy that says students cannot be promoted until they have completed enough units and have passed their core classes for that grade level. So if a student has completed enough units to be a senior but did not pass the second semester of freshman English, that student is still a freshman.

“Instead of the kids being held accountable at the end [in their senior year], they get the message early,” Salerno says. “That [approach] plus the High School Exit Exam and the Algebra I requirement are making kids more aware of what they need to do.”

To help students who have not completed core courses, the district offers summer school and the option of taking those courses during the school year. The district’s dropout rates are below the state average.

But the El Monte Union HSD does not stop there. Teachers, counselors, and administrators go over STAR results with students individually, discussing the areas where they need to improve. “We individualized it to make it more important to the kids,” Salerno says. “It was a huge effort, but it paid off.”

Individual principals also develop their own methods to encourage student accountability, such as holding special meetings for the parents of students who are getting Ds and Fs.

“There are more incentives, consequences, and motivation,” he says. “We think this has had some impact on our API scores.”

The district emphasizes teaching the standards

El Monte Union HSD also focused on aligning the curriculum to the state’s academic standards. District administrators set

up districtwide committees based on subject area. For each core subject area, one teacher from each school is designated a content specialist and is released 5th period to meet with his or her counterparts to develop curricula aligned to the standards. One of the results of the English language arts committee is a common writing rubric for English classes in the district.

“The focus is on teaching and providing consistency,” Salerno says. “These are teacher-generated changes.”

The district has also produced benchmark exams. Administrators meet with the entire department to encourage the development of teaching methods based on the exams. For example, the social science teachers met over the summer to set districtwide benchmarks on teaching government. Based on the exams, the teachers saw what areas the students did not understand as well as flaws in the testing questions. They developed new teaching approaches and adjusted the time allotted to the subject. “These assessments are driving instruction and the pacing of instruction,” Salerno says.

Facing challenges is key

One of the biggest challenges facing El Monte is the low reading ability of many of its students. Each high school has reading advancement classes but, Salerno says, “there is not enough room for every student who needs help.” The schools have chosen to start with those with the lowest ability, he says. English learners, in particular, need extra help.

Through an English Language and Intensive Literacy Program (ELILP) grant, English learners have extended summer school so they can work on their English in the afternoon. “We’ve seen positive results from this,” Salerno says. The district also offers tutoring in English and other core subjects after school and during lunch.

Like many schools in California, El Monte Union HSD schools had a significant number of teachers not fully credentialed, about 26% on average in 2000–01. The district is using Teaching as a Priority (TAP) grants to encourage their teachers to pursue a full credential. The assistant superintendent for personnel met with each individual teacher so the teacher knows exactly what to do to obtain that credential, Salerno says. Since 2000–01 “we have cut in half the number of teachers not fully credentialed,” he says.

In addition, three high schools are part of the federal Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) project. Working with UCLA, the schools have created site leadership teams to organize improvement efforts. And three high schools are taking part in a schoolwide literacy project.

The district’s focus is “improving student achievement, and everyone works toward that goal each and every day,” says Superintendent Kathy M. Furnald.

school principal said, “The staff have focused on data to make instructional decisions and to concentrate on a schoolwide goal of reading improvement. This was done in a collaborative process.”

State reforms create a foundation for school improvement

John Soletti, Jr., principal at Weed High School, captured the opinion of many when he wrote: “In regard to student achievement, the California Standards have provided a blueprint for making major headway.”

Among the 155 school principals who responded to the EdSource survey at the end of 2002, positive attitudes about the state’s standards-based reform efforts were a common theme. Many of these educators, who are struggling to raise achievement in California’s lowest-performing schools, seem hopeful that state academic standards can help lead to improvement.

Another theme was the positive effect of establishing a well-integrated curriculum and knowing what to expect of students from one year to the next. The progress is even stronger when teachers in a school are given extensive training geared to the specifics of that curriculum, including specialized teaching methods. Overarching these observations about instructional focus was a belief in the importance of a shared schoolwide focus, with teachers encouraged to work together and discuss their practice and principals using more of their time for instructional leadership that helps maintain the focus.

Undeniably, many obstacles stand in the way of progress for California’s lowest-performing schools. Some are the effect of students’ backgrounds, particularly when multiple risk factors combine at a single school. It seems clear that no one factor is by itself “disabling” even though the challenges created by student poverty are of particular concern. It is also apparent that, if they are to meet high expectations, these students need to attend schools where the quality and stability of the teaching staff are as high as possible. State policy leaves the placement of teachers to school districts and teachers’ unions. Thus local administrative practices and the provisions of collective bargaining agreements can either reinforce the problems of teacher distribution and turnover or help solve them.

The question of whether the most challenged schools have the financial resources they need hinges on district and state policy actions. Based on the financial data collected by the state, the districts that serve the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools spend close to the same amount per pupil, on average, as do California school districts generally. The amount of support these districts allocate to their individual schools, and its impact on their ability to improve student achievement, is not known at a statewide level. The state does not require school districts to report school-level financial data,

but it is an important question for the public and policymakers to ask, and one they should reasonably expect school district officials to answer. In the face of the state’s current budget crisis—with impending cuts for K–12 education—the fair and effective allocation of available resources to schools becomes even more important.

It is clear that both the district and community in which a school operates can have a dramatic influence on that school’s ability to succeed. It is likely not a coincidence, for example, that the schools whose progress was highlighted in this report were in the same school district. District-level policies and support can create the conditions necessary for success or they can make success nearly impossible. Likewise, the power of a community to advocate for and force school improvement is well known. Alternatively, schools can be much more effective when they find ways to marshal the active support and social capital of their parent community on behalf of learning.

Meanwhile, state policies continue to put the spotlight on performance at the school level, and accurately measuring academic improvement remains a challenge. California’s accountability system continues to depend on the Academic Performance Index, an index that is not without its critics. Early in its development, many raised concerns that it was based on just the Stanford-9, a test that only compared students to a national norm. As of 2003, the state’s testing system and the index are incorporating and giving more weight to the California Standards Tests that measure how students are performing based on California’s academic standards. Yet lawmakers’ original vision that the API would also include non-testing data, such as attendance and dropout rates, is far from being realized.

Nonetheless, the API remains California’s chief barometer of school performance. By this measure, the vast majority of the 968 elementary schools that were cited as the state’s lowest-performing in 1999 have made some progress: 33% met their overall improvement growth targets in three consecutive years; 42% met them in two out of three years; and another 19% met them for one year. Further, about 10% have made what EdSource would describe as “exemplary progress,” substantially exceeding their state-set growth targets all three years. These elementary schools are starting to raise the academic performance of students who come to school from poor families, who do not speak English, and whose parents have little formal education. And they are seeing success with staffs that include teachers less than fully credentialed. They seem to have benefited from the state’s focus on reading as the highest priority, the availability of new instructional materials, targeted and specific teacher training, and extra resources to add instructional time outside the regular school day.


Unfortunately, California’s middle and high schools have not done as well. Some obvious differences between the ele-

mentary and secondary schools may have implications for the latter's slower progress. The academic skills secondary schools teach are more complex than 1st-grade math or 3rd-grade reading, and more difficult for all students to master. Further, at this level and particularly in high school, there is less consensus about learning goals as they apply to all students.

Californians need to also acknowledge that, to date, the intense effort at academic improvement at the elementary level has not been matched at middle and high schools. Teachers at these levels are less likely to be participating in curriculum-focused, high quality professional development programs, and the state generally has not developed the same high level of support for areas of the curriculum outside of English language arts and math. Also, local districts in California currently retain much more control over the high school curriculum than is true for K–8. The question of whether that practice serves the needs of students remains open for discussion, particularly in light of the slower improvement in high schools.

Ultimately, the students themselves can make a difference. To some degree, as better prepared students begin entering California's middle and high schools, their test scores may naturally be higher, leading to improved middle

and high school APIs in the immediate future. Perhaps greater academic success in the early grades will also help the motivation and attitudes of some young people in regard to school coursework and tests. These hypotheses remain to be tested. Regardless, the need for California policymakers and educators to focus on improving middle and high school student achievement appears clear.

At every grade level, some schools in California have for many years beaten the odds by demonstrating strong student performance at schools with overwhelming numbers of students whose demographic characteristics might predict otherwise. Further, many schools that were doing very poorly just a few years ago are also making important improvements. From the information available, it appears that these schools have no magic formula or silver bullet. Among them, they have used a variety of different strategies and interventions that seem to have raised student achievement. Perhaps most of all, their experiences suggest that a purposeful and firm emphasis on improving the academic progress of all students, combined with the allocation of resources consistent with that goal—including teachers, professional development, textbooks, and extra support—can indeed make a difference. 



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To Learn More

Selected Resources

2002–03 Budget: Education: *Reforming Categorical Program Funding*, and *2002–03 Budget Act: The Challenge and the Solution*. Legislative Analyst's Office, 2002. www.lao.ca.gov

Additional information related to this report is available on the EdSource website, in the accountability section of Education Issues. It includes:

- A list of the Beating the Odds schools;
- A copy of the principal survey; and
- Additional data, including some charts and graphs.

You'll find links to all of this information at: www.edsourcesource.org/pub_abs_lps.cfm

More information about individual schools and districts can be found at the Education Data Partnership website: www.ed-data.k12.ca.us. This includes financial statements and demographic profiles for districts, plus API data and demographic information for schools. In addition, the site includes powerful new functions that make it possible to compare such things as the API scores of schools that serve similar students and the expenditures per pupil among districts in a county.

General background and current updates on the state API calculation, testing system, and intervention and award programs is available on the website of the California Department of Education at: www.cde.ca.gov