California's Public School Ranking and Reward System

Calfornia's Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) aims to make schools responsible for their students' academic achievement and progress. Signed into law in April 1999, the PSAA includes:

- A method to measure how well a school is doing, called the Academic Performance Index (API);

- Programs to help low-performing schools; and

- Rewards for schools meeting state-defined annual improvement goals.

What is the Academic Performance Index (API)?

The API is the centerpiece of California's program to hold schools accountable. It compares how a school's students as a whole perform relative to other schools in California.

The California Department of Education (CDE) computes schools' API scores. The CDE combines students' test scores from standards-based tests and the CAT/6 basic-skills test for all grade levels and subjects into a single number between 200 and 1,000. This composite index, the API score, becomes a measure of a school's performance that is used to rank schools and determine eligibility for some state programs.

The California Standards Tests (CSTs) are based on the state's academic content standards. Students in grades 2–11 take these tests in English language arts and mathematics. Upper-grade students also take tests in science and history/social science. In addition, the API for high schools includes results from the California High School Exit Exam, which is based on the state's standards in English language arts and math.

The California Achievement Test, Sixth Edition Survey (CAT/6) is a multiple-choice test that compares California students to others in the nation. It replaces the similar Stanford-9 test beginning in spring 2003. CAT/6 covers basic mathematics, reading, and language arts in grades 2–11, spelling in grades 2–8, and science in high school. California is using the "survey" form of the test, which is shorter than the full-length version.

Initially the API was based only on the results of the Stanford-9 test. But tests based on state standards have been growing in importance. Beginning in early 2003, 80% of the API calculation for elementary and middle schools will be based on the CST results and 20% on the basic-skills test. For high schools, 73% will be based on the CSTs, 15% on the High School Exit Exam, and 12% on the basic-skills test results.

What is a "good" API score?

The State Board of Education (SBE) has determined that schools should strive for an API score of 800 or above. Schools that score at or above 800 are expected to at least maintain their scores. Schools that score below 800 are expected to show improvement not only for their student body as a whole but also for significant "subgroups" of students (based on family income or ethnicity). Schools with API scores below 800 need to close the gap between their score and 800 by 5% each year.

For example, if a school scored 600 on the 2003 Base API, its "growth target" would be 610 for the 2004 Growth API:

800 – 600 = 200
200 x 5% = 10
600 + 10 = 610

How are API scores reported?

API scores are reported in two-year cycles. Around January schools receive a "Base API" score based on the results of tests taken in the previous spring, and a growth target is set. Then students take tests in the spring, and results are reported in the summer. In the fall each school learns whether it achieved its growth target when it receives its "Growth API" score. The cycle begins again with a new Base API, released around January of the next calendar year. The Base API may differ slightly from the previous Growth API because of new factors added in the calculation.

How are schools compared to each other?

The PSAA program uses the public ranking of schools to give positive recognition to schools with high API scores and to pressure schools with low API scores to improve. The system includes separate rankings for the three types of schools—elementary, middle, and high—based on API scores. Each number in the ranking from "1" (lowest) to "10" (highest) represents 10% or a "decile" of the state's schools. A "1" ranking for a high school means that 90% of the state's high schools scored better than that school. A school with a "1" ranking is said to be in Decile 1. A "10" means that the school performed in the top 10% of schools of its type and is a Decile 10 school.

The rankings do not include schools that are very small, run by a county office of education, or are in a special category such as continuation schools. The state has developed a separate accountability system for those schools. For more information, go to: **http://www.cde.ca.gov/psaa/asam/**

The API is one way to measure the success of a school. Other ways include assessing the experience and credentials of its staff, the academic support offered to struggling students, the opportunities available for advanced students, and the depth and breadth of programs in art and music. Yet another way to evaluate a school is to look at its "similar schools" ranking.

What is the "similar schools" ranking?

Students' test scores are strongly associated with factors such as family income, parent education level (e.g., high school or college graduate), and students' knowledge of English. As a result, schools with large numbers of students from low-income families, for example, tend to have lower API scores.

Partly because of problems in comparing schools with very different student populations, the PSAA created a second ranking system that compares similar schools. This similar schools ranking—also from "1" (lowest) to "10" (highest)—measures how well a school is living up to its potential based on its challenges. It compares a school's API score to the scores of 100 other schools with similar characteristics such as student mobility, ethnicity, fluency in English, family income, and parent education level. Other characteristics include average class size, teachers' credentials, and whether a school operates year-round.

Does the state have a program to help low-performing schools?

State leaders are increasingly putting emphasis on and allocating funds to "underperforming schools"—the more than 3,000 schools in the bottom half of the API ranking system. Beginning in 1999–2000, such schools could apply to be part of the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP). The program provides schools with funds to create a plan during the first year and—once the plan is approved by the state—to implement it in the next two to three years. In the first three years of the II/USP, 430 schools each year were chosen. But no schools were chosen in 2002–03 because of the state's fiscal crisis.

If an II/USP school implements its plan and successfully reaches or exceeds its growth target two years in a row, it graduates from the II/USP.

But schools that do not improve face consequences. If a school does not reach its growth target after its first year of implementing its plan, then school leaders must hold a public hearing about their program. If a school does not meet its growth targets during both implementation years but shows some API growth in one of those years, it stays in the II/USP

for another year. If a school fails to show any API growth during both implementation years, the State Board of Education and the Superintendent of Public Instruction will intervene, requiring one of two options:

- The school's district, with funding help from the state, must contract with an assistance team to work with the school; or

- The state can take over the rights and responsibilities of the school district with respect to the school and assign a state trustee or a nonprofit school-management organization, such as a county office of education or university.

In 2001–02 state leaders added the High Priority Schools Grant Program (HPSGP), which provides additional resources to low-performing schools, with an initial emphasis on Decile 1 schools. All Decile 1 schools are eligible for the HPSGP whether or not they are part of the II/USP. Decile 1 schools that were already in the II/USP and that joined HPSGP will not face state intervention in 2002–03 for a lack of improvement. The schools will be allowed to participate in HPSGP, but they must eventually improve or face intervention.

Schools that are successful under either of these programs and meet or exceed their API growth targets are eligible for the same monetary awards as any other school.

Are schools rewarded if they improve?

Beginning in fall 2000, all schools that met or exceeded their API growth targets were eligible to receive a Governor's Performance Award. After two years of distributing these monetary awards, state leaders did not provide funds for rewards based on the 2002 Growth API results because of California's budget crisis.

How can I find out more?

For information on a particular school, talk to the principal, a school board member, or the president of the school's parent organization. You can also:

- Look at the API score for the school at the Education Data Partnership website: **www.ed-data.k12.ca.us**;

- Visit the Department of Education's website, **www.cde.ca.gov/psaa**, which lists API scores as well as other information about the PSAA program;

- Contact the Department of Education by e-mail at psaa@cde.ca.gov;

- Call the Office of Policy and Evaluation at 916/319-0869.