



# **Characteristics of California school districts in program improvement: 2008 update**

**Prepared by**

**Eric W. Crane  
WestEd**

**Chun-Wei Huang  
WestEd**

**Min Huang  
WestEd**

**Kenwyn Derby  
WestEd**

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REL West received a request from California policymakers to update the Issues & Answers report, *Characteristics of California school districts in program improvement*, issued in July 2008 (<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=152&productID=55>) and based on 2005/06 data, now that data covering academic performance in 2006/07 are available.

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## Summary

**This descriptive analysis updates an earlier study of California’s Title I school districts in program improvement, which was based on performance data for 2005/06, with another year of data. By 2006/07 more school districts were in program improvement, with nearly 100 districts moving into the corrective action phase of district improvement (also called Year 3). California’s accountability system continues to identify problems at the district level that are missed at the school level.**

The July 2008 Issues & Answers report, *Characteristics of California school districts in program improvement*, described the landscape of district accountability in California (<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=152&productID=55>). This technical brief updates that work, based on another year of performance data. The new data show that more districts have moved into program improvement status and that few have moved out.

Analysis of the new data also confirms the following findings from the previous report:

- The district accountability system monitored the progress of many students overlooked by the school accountability system.
- Districts in program improvement tended to be larger, with more students and more schools, and more urban than other districts.
- Districts in program improvement had different demographics from districts not identified for improvement, including higher proportions of Hispanic, Black, English language learner, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students.
- Districts in program improvement did not meet proficiency targets in multiple areas.

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# Technical brief

## Why this study?

The July 2008 Issues & Answers report, *Characteristics of California school districts in program improvement*, described the landscape of district accountability in California based on student performance data for 2005/06. (See [http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/pdf/REL\\_2008055.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/pdf/REL_2008055.pdf) for findings and research methodology, along with background on the No Child Left Behind accountability and California's accountability system.)

Once new data covering academic performance in the 2006/07 school year became available, California policymakers requested an update.<sup>1</sup> With the first California districts having moved into the corrective action phase (also called Year 3) of program improvement at the start of the 2007/08 school year, this information is particularly timely. Districts in corrective action must implement a new standards-aligned curriculum and revise and implement a district plan. California is piloting the District Assistance and Intervention Team (DAIT) process, in which a team of county office of education or other organizational leaders provide targeted technical assistance, monitoring, guidance, and support to districts in corrective action (California Department of Education and California County Superintendents Educational Services Association 2007).

California school districts receiving Title I funds (accounting for 99 percent of California's public school enrollment) are subject to No Child Left Behind accountability requirements, including, when applicable, its program improvement requirements. And California requirements for districts in program improvement mirror federal requirements. California's districts first became subject to program improvement in 2005/06 if they had failed to make adequate yearly progress during 2003/04 and 2004/05 in the same content area or accountability category. During 2005/06 these

school districts were in Year 1 status. Districts in Year 1 status that did not make adequate yearly progress during 2005/06 advanced to Year 2 status in 2006/07, while those that did remained in Year 1 status. This process of changing status for failing to make adequate yearly progress and maintaining status for making progress repeats each year. If current trends continue, even more school districts will move into program improvement and its corrective action phase. The budgetary and policy consequences of such an outcome are difficult to predict.

## Findings for California's districts in program improvement

The following are the main findings of this study:

- More districts have moved into program improvement status, and few have moved out.
- The district accountability system monitored the progress of many students that the school accountability system did not monitor.
- Districts in program improvement tended to be larger and more urban than other districts.
- Districts in program improvement had different student demographics than other districts did.
- Districts in program improvement did not meet proficiency targets in multiple areas.

### More districts have moved into program improvement status, and few have moved out

The July 2008 report documented that 159 (17 percent) of California's 961 Title I school districts were in program improvement during 2006/07. These districts served more than 2.6 million students, or 42 percent of public school enrollment (Crane et al. 2008). By the 2007/08 school year 187 (19 percent) of the

now 971 California districts receiving Title I funding were in program improvement, and 784 (81 percent) were not.<sup>2</sup> The districts in program improvement now served more than 2.9 million students, or 47 percent of public school enrollment.

Of the 187 districts in program improvement in 2007/08, 38 were in Year 1 status, 52 were in Year 2, and 97 were in Year 3 (table 1). The Year 1 cohort had not made adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years (in the same content area or accountability category), whereas the Year 2 cohort had not made adequate yearly progress for three years running and the Year 3 cohort for four years. An additional 278 districts not identified for improvement had not made adequate yearly progress during 2006/07 and so were at risk of

entering program improvement in 2008/09 if they did not make adequate yearly progress in 2007/08. For comparison, 2006/07 figures are also shown in table 1.

Taken together, the previous and current year's figures show that the status of most districts in program improvement has worsened. For example, of the 100 districts that were in Year 2 status during 2006/07, 97 were in Year 3 status during 2007/08.

**The district accountability system monitored the progress of many students that the school accountability system did not monitor**

Consistent with the earlier study—documenting the 207 districts that failed to make adequate yearly progress on at least one requirement even though all of their schools did so on

TABLE 1  
**Program improvement status of California's Title I districts, 2006/07 and 2007/08**

Status	2006/07 <sup>a</sup>		2007/08	
	Number of districts	Percent of total	Number of districts	Percent of total
In program improvement	159	16.5	187	19.3
Year 1 status (not making adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years during 2003/04–2006/07)	59	6.1	38 <sup>b</sup>	3.9
Year 2 status (not making adequate yearly progress for three consecutive years during 2003/04–2006/07)	100	10.4	52	5.4
Corrective action/Year 3 status (not making adequate yearly progress for four consecutive years, 2003/04–2006/07)	na	na	97	10.0
Not identified for improvement	802	83.5	784	80.7
Made adequate yearly progress in prior year	595	61.9	506	52.1
Did not make adequate yearly progress in prior year	207	21.5	278	28.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>961</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>971</b>	<b>100.0</b>

na is not applicable.

a. Information about status for the 2006/07 school year is based on adequate yearly progress determinations through 2005/06.

b. These 38 districts are mainly from the 207 districts that did not make adequate yearly progress in 2006/07 (some may have been in Year 1 in 2006/07 and have frozen their status).

Source: Authors' analysis based on data from California Department of Education (2007a,b; 2008a,b).

the same requirement—accountability data for 2006/07 confirmed differences between school and district accountability. To make adequate yearly progress, California districts need to meet as many as 46 individual requirements.<sup>3</sup> In 2006/07, the year on which the 2007/08 designations of districts in program improvement were based, 254 (26 percent) of the state’s 971 districts failed to make adequate yearly progress on at least one requirement, even though all of their schools made adequate yearly progress on (or were not accountable for) that requirement (table 2). In 34 of these 254 districts all of the schools met all the requirements or were not held accountable for them (not shown in table). Collectively, these 254 districts—98 of them in program improvement at the time—enrolled more than 1.6 million students (26 percent of the statewide enrollment). Thus, a district may be in program improvement even if none or only a few of its schools are. In 2007/08, 11 districts in program improvement had no schools identified for improvement.

There are two reasons why districts might not meet an adequate yearly progress requirement when all of their schools do: districts are held accountable for students who are not enrolled in a school for a full academic year, and individual schools may have too few students in a given subgroup to be held accountable for their progress under the requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001.

In California, schools with fewer than 100 students in a subgroup are not held accountable for the test participation or performance of students in that subgroup. But when those students are aggregated at the district level, the districtwide subgroup size may be large enough for an adequate yearly progress determination.

There are instances when the district-level accountability system (unlike the school-level system) identifies and counts students who do not meet a particular standard. This was most evident for students with disabilities (table 3). Of California’s 971 districts, 164 (17 percent) did not meet the English language arts annual measurable objective proficiency target for their students with disabilities subgroup in 2006/07, even though each of their schools individually met this target or, more commonly, was not held accountable for it. To put this figure in perspective, consider English language learner students, the group with the second largest number of differences between school-level and district-level accountability. Only 15 districts (2 percent, or less than a tenth of districts with a district-school difference pertaining to students with disabilities) did not meet the English language arts annual measurable objective proficiency target for their English language learner subgroup in 2006/07, even though each of their schools either met this target or, more commonly, was not held accountable for it. Such differences resulted almost entirely from

TABLE 2

**California districts that failed an adequate yearly progress requirement but had no schools that failed the same requirement, 2006/07**

Category	Number of districts or students	Percent of all Title I districts <sup>a</sup>
Districts with district-school difference	254	26
Districts in program improvement	98	10
Districts not identified for improvement	156	16
Student enrollment in these districts	1,629,441	26

a. N = 971 districts, 6,192,397 students.

Source: Authors’ analysis based on data from California Department of Education (2008a).

the aggregation at a district level of subgroups that were too small to be counted at individual schools.

Of the 2,023 schools overseen by these 164 districts, only 18 had enough students with disabilities in 2006/07 to be counted for accountability purposes, and all 18 met the English language arts annual measurable objective proficiency target. In other accountability categories for this subgroup 29 districts had these district-school accountability differences for the mathematics proficiency target, 79 districts for the English language arts participation

rate, and 33 districts for the mathematics participation rate. Some districts failed more than one requirement. Taken together, 209 California districts (21 percent) failed to meet an adequate yearly progress requirement for their students with disabilities subgroup, even though none of their schools failed to meet the same requirement. (The 209 districts represent an unduplicated count that cannot be derived directly from table 3.) Such differences were also evident, though less common, across other adequate yearly progress requirements (see table 3).

TABLE 3  
**Detail for the 254 California districts that failed an adequate yearly progress requirement but had no schools that failed the same requirement, 2006/07 (number of districts)**

Adequate yearly progress requirement	English language arts	Mathematics	Additional indicator
<b>Annual measurable objective proficiency target</b>			
Students with disabilities	164	29	na
English language learner students	15	4	na
Hispanic students	7	3	na
Socioeconomically disadvantaged students	6	6	na
Black students	3	8	na
School- or districtwide	3	6	na
White students	3	4	na
American Indian students	3	3	na
<b>Participation rate</b>			
Students with disabilities	79	33	na
Socioeconomically disadvantaged students	9	6	na
White students	7	6	na
School- or districtwide	6	4	na
Hispanic students	5	4	na
Black students	2	2	na
English language learner students	1	0	na
<b>Additional indicator</b>			
Academic Performance Index criteria	na	na	2
Graduation rate	na	na	5

na is not applicable.

Note: Totals (not shown) exceed 254 because some districts have district-school differences in multiple categories.

Source: Authors' analysis based on data from California Department of Education (2008a).

California’s adequate yearly progress accountability rules at the district and school levels continue to yield different results for some districts and their schools. In these cases districts are held accountable for students who slip through school accountability processes. Together, the dual approaches appear comprehensive—counting and being accountable for all students. By identifying under-performance missed by the school accountability system, California’s district accountability procedures capture the performance and progress of students who might otherwise fall through the cracks, particularly students with disabilities.

#### Districts in program improvement tended to be larger and more urban than other districts

California’s districts in program improvement tended to have more schools and higher student enrollments than districts not identified for improvement. In 2006/07 the median number

of schools and enrollments in districts in program improvement was 12 schools and 7,085 students, compared with 4 schools and 1,101 students for other districts.<sup>4</sup>

Collectively, California’s 187 districts in program improvement enrolled more than 2.9 million students in 2006/07, with just under half of those students (1.4 million) also enrolled in the 1,560 schools in program improvement (table 4). Another 383,967 students were in schools in program improvement in districts not identified for improvement.

Overall, California’s districts in program improvement oversaw more schools in improvement (1,560) than did districts not identified for improvement (627). The average number of schools in program improvement in districts in program improvement (8.3) was more than 10 times the number in districts not identified for improvement (0.8). Furthermore, the schools in program improvement in districts in program improvement tended to

TABLE 4

#### California’s enrollment and number of schools in 2006/07, classified by 2007/08 school and district program improvement status

	In districts in program improvement	In districts not identified for improvement	Total
In schools in program improvement			
Enrollment	1,352,435 (22%)	383,967 (6%)	1,736,402 (28%)
Number of schools	1,560 (15%)	627 (6%)	2,187 (21%)
In schools not identified for improvement			
Enrollment	1,580,703 (26%)	2,875,292 (46%)	4,455,995 (72%)
Number of schools	2,761 (26%)	5,718 (54%)	8,479 (79%)
Total			
Enrollment	2,933,138 (48%)	3,259,259 (52%)	6,192,397 (100%)
Number of schools	4,321 (41%)	6,345 (59%)	10,666 (100%)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are percentages of total enrollment and of total number of schools. Numbers do not include the 63,534 students enrolled in the 61 districts that do not receive Title I funds.

Source: Authors’ analysis based on data from California Department of Education (2008b) for program improvement status and California Department of Education (2008c) for student enrollment.

face more severe sanctions than did schools in program improvement in other districts. Of the 1,290 California schools in corrective action (schools in program improvement for three or more years) in 2007/08, 984 (76 percent) were in districts in program improvement.

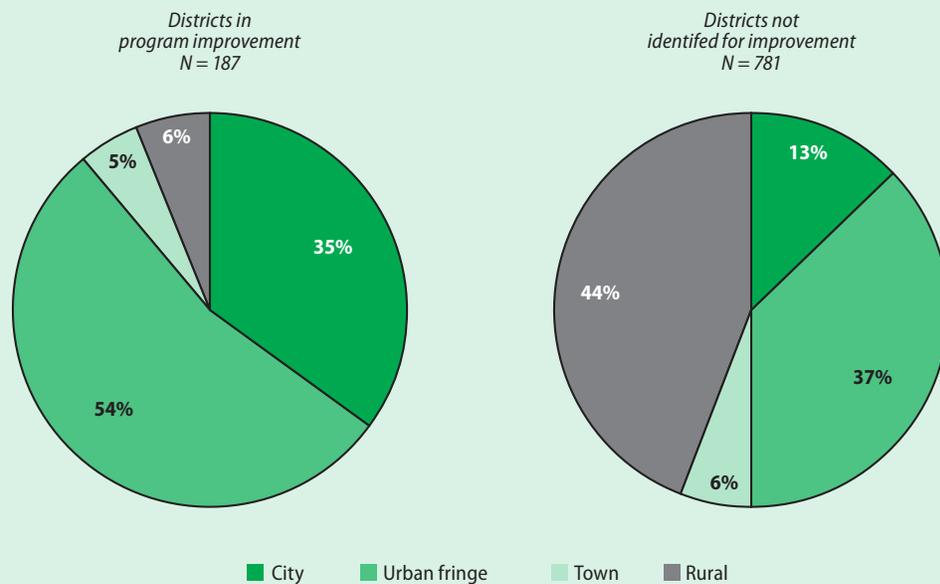
California's districts in program improvement tended to be located in more urban settings. In 2005/06, the most recent year for which data were available at the time of writing, 89 percent of districts in program improvement were in city or urban fringe areas, compared with only 50 percent of other districts (figure 1).<sup>5</sup> But not all large, urban districts were in program improvement. In 2007/08, 4 of the state's 10 largest districts (San Diego Unified, Elk Grove Unified, Capistrano Unified, and Corona-Norco Unified) were not in program improvement.<sup>6</sup>

### Districts in program improvement had different student demographics than did other districts

The ethnic composition of districts in program improvement tended to differ from that of districts not identified for improvement. For example, in 2006/07, among districts in program improvement, the median percentages of Hispanic students (59 percent) and Black students (3 percent) were both about double the medians in districts not identified for improvement (24 percent and 2 percent); and the median percentage of White students (19 percent) in districts in program improvement was a third of that in other districts (57 percent).

The proportions of special populations of students tended to differ as well. In 2006/07 the median percentages of English language learner students and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch were both higher in districts

FIGURE 1  
**Distribution of California's districts in program improvement and districts not identified for improvement, by locale, 2005/06**



Note: Locale data lag most other data in this report by one year. Because of missing data, districts not in program improvement total fewer than 784.

Source: Authors' analysis based on data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2008).

TABLE 5

**Student demographics in California’s districts in program improvement and districts not identified for improvement, 2006/07 (median percentages)**

Subgroup	Districts in program improvement (N = 187)	Districts not identified for improvement (N = 784)
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
White, not Hispanic	19.0 (7.2–34.2)	57.0 (31.3–74.0)
Hispanic	58.5 (43.3–80.4)	24.0 (10.0–47.5)
Black, not Hispanic	3.2 (1.0–9.1)	1.6 (0.6–3.4)
Asian	1.7 (0.9–4.4)	1.6 (0.6–5.2)
American Indian	0.5 (0.3–0.8)	0.7 (0.2–2.0)
Filipino	0.7 (0.4–2.0)	0.5 (0.0–1.5)
Pacific Islander	0.3 (0.1–0.6)	0.3 (0.0–0.6)
<b>Special populations</b>		
English language learner students	30.6 (19.8–43.8)	10.2 (2.6–24.1)
Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	63.3 (47.9–79.6)	43.5 (22.6–64.6)
Students with disabilities	10.5 (8.9–12.5)	10.7 (8.2–12.8)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are the spread of values from the 25th to the 75th percentiles, which give a sense of how districts vary within each group.

Source: Authors’ analysis based on California Department of Education (2008d) for race/ethnicity; California Department of Education (2008f) for English language learners; California Department of Education (2008e) for students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; and California Department of Education (2008a) for students with disabilities.

in program improvement (table 5). The exception was students with disabilities, with median proportions similar in both types of districts.

#### **Districts in program improvement did not meet proficiency targets in multiple areas**

Many districts that did not make adequate yearly progress in 2006/07 fell short in multiple areas. Of the 278 districts not identified for improvement that did not make adequate

yearly progress in 2006/07, 56 (20 percent) fell short in more than one area. And of the 177 districts in program improvement that did not make adequate yearly progress in 2006/07, 72 (41 percent) had multiple problem areas. The most challenging requirements by far for those districts were the English language arts annual measurable objective proficiency targets for students with disabilities (not met in 85 percent of districts accountable for the subgroup) and for

English language learner students (not met in 62 percent of districts). The next most challenging requirement was the graduation rate: 32 percent of districts in program improvement failed to meet this target (table 6).

In moving forward, California's districts in program improvement face substantial challenges. While only 10 of 187 (5 percent) of California's districts in program improvement met all of their adequate yearly progress requirements in 2006/07, 506 of the 784 (65 percent) other districts did so. If these

10 districts in program improvement make adequate yearly progress again in 2007/08, they will exit program improvement. (The California Department of Education released adequate yearly progress determinations for 2007/08 in September 2008, too late for coverage in this technical brief.) Statewide proficiency levels are set to increase next year and each successive year through the spring of 2014, however, making it more challenging for all districts to make adequate yearly progress.

TABLE 6

**Adequate yearly progress requirements on which California's districts in program improvement fell short most frequently in 2006/07**

Adequate yearly progress requirement	Number of districts in program improvement held accountable for requirement <sup>a</sup>	Percentage of districts accountable that did not meet requirement
English language arts annual measurable objective target for students with disabilities subgroup	151	85
English language arts annual measurable objective target for English language learner student subgroup	170	62
Districtwide graduation rate	111	32
English language arts test participation for students with disabilities subgroup	158	31
English language arts annual measurable objective target for Hispanic student subgroup	176	20
Mathematics annual measurable objective target for students with disabilities subgroup	153	19
English language arts annual measurable objective target for socioeconomically disadvantaged student subgroup	180	16
Mathematics annual measurable objective target for Black student subgroup	95	14
Mathematics test participation for students with disabilities subgroup	158	11
Districtwide English language arts proficiency rate met (percentage scoring proficient or above)	187	9

a. These are the districts in program improvement that had a sufficiently large subgroup size to be held accountable for the specific adequate yearly progress requirement in 2006/07.

Source: Authors' analysis based on data from California Department of Education (2008a).

**Notes**

1. This report is based on California Department of Education datasets and updates through August 1, 2008 only.
2. Throughout the report, because of missing data, districts in program improvement may sometimes total fewer than 187, and districts not identified for improvement may sometimes total fewer than 784.
3. There are four requirements (English language arts performance and participation, mathematics performance and participation) that apply to as many as 11 different student subgroups (all students, seven ethnic groups, socio-economically disadvantaged students, English language learner students, and students with disabilities), plus an additional indicator (graduation rate for high schools, academic performance index for other schools):  $4 \times 11 + 1 + 1 = 46$ .
4. The median values are the 50th percentile for the characteristic. Equal numbers of districts have higher and lower values. The median is used in this report because extreme values—such as those associated with Los Angeles Unified, by far California’s largest district—can skew the average.
5. The U.S. Census Bureau uses eight location (locale) codes to delineate the urban and rural characteristics of school districts. For this analysis these codes were merged into four more general density classifications: city (“large city” and “mid-size city”), urban fringe (“urban fringe of large city” and “urban fringe of mid-size city”), town (“large town” and “small town”), and rural (“rural, outside core-based statistical area” and “rural, inside core-based statistical area”).
6. Long Beach Unified, California’s third largest district, moved into Year 1 of program improvement in the 2007/08 school year.

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