

Student Achievement in California

Steady Progress Made,
Faster Improvement Needed

May 2004

WestEd®

excellence in research, development, & service

WestEd is a nonprofit research, development, and service agency whose comprehensive programs and wide-ranging expertise focus on education and human development, with a priority of serving underserved populations. Our broad scope of work creates effective and lasting solutions to the challenges that arise within these complex spheres.

For more information about WestEd, visit our Web site: WestEd.org; call 415.565.3000 or toll-free, (877) 4-WestEd; or write: WestEd/730 Harrison Street/San Francisco, CA 94107-1242.

© 2004 WestEd. All rights reserved.

For more information about this report, *Student Achievement in California: Steady Progress Made, Faster Improvement Needed*, contact Dr. Paul. H. Koehler, Director, Policy Center; 415.615.3160.

Introduction

The performance of California's 4th graders on the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) sent shock waves through the state and marked a pivotal moment in state education policy. The scores were so poor that the state whose public education system was once considered the gold standard for the nation ranked second to last among participating states. What's more, African American students and California's burgeoning population of Latino children fared considerably worse than white and Asian students.

The news came at a time when the United States as a whole was retrenching on education. The nationwide drumbeat for reform, begun in the 1980s, had gained volume by the 1990s as alarm grew over poor student test scores and their implications for 21st century workforce demands. In the intensified push for change, policymakers got an ominous message: reform or lose public education. The response was a sweeping movement across the states to shift from a focus on ensuring schools' compliance with rules and statutes to holding schools accountable for student results.

Propelled by its low NAEP scores, California joined this movement. Using an approach similar to that of other states and now embodied in federal law, policymakers crafted a three-part accountability system. Its centerpiece is a set of standards – widely acknowledged to be among the best in the nation – delineating what all students need to know and be able to do in each subject and at every grade level. An assessment system measures annual student progress under the standards, with scores reported by subgroups (e.g., ethnic, language, special needs, low-income). Finally, the system spells out consequences for performance.

The Public School Accountability Act was adopted by the California legislature in 1999. Its goals are to raise achievement across the board, to improve outcomes in low-performing schools, and to narrow gaps between student groups, particularly the socioeconomic and ethnic achievement gap that creates a competitive disadvantage for Latino and African American students nationwide.

Now, five years later, this brief examines student achievement in California. It describes California's evolving accountability and assessment mechanisms and how they interrelate today with new federal accountability requirements. It presents WestEd's analysis of achievement scores on state as well as national tests. Finally, it draws four conclusions:

- » California continues to rank at or near the bottom among states, though the lag is not profound and must be considered in light of California's distinct demographics.
- » The state's strategy appears to be working. Over the last four years, test scores have risen persistently, statewide, for all student groups, with the lowest-performing groups in some cases showing the greatest gains.
- » Progress needs to accelerate because student achievement remains low.
- » Significant gaps persist between different groups of students.

California's Evolving Accountability and Assessment Systems

California's central mechanism for holding schools accountable has been the academic performance index (API), which tracks students' performance and growth as measured by statewide testing. Initially, the state relied solely on an "off the shelf" national test (the SAT-9). Since 2002, the testing system has expanded to include the California Standards Tests (CSTs), which specifically measure progress under California's standards, and the California High School Exit Examination. (See figure 1.)

Tests are given annually to students in grades 2 to 11. Based on their students' performance, schools then receive a composite API score, ranging from a high of 1000

FIGURE 1: Components of the API

The primary tool for calculating the API is California's testing program known as the Standardized Testing and Reporting System (STAR), whose main pieces are the CSTs and the CAT-6, described below. In addition, the API for high schools includes the state's high school exit examination.

California Standards Tests (CSTs). These test how well students are mastering the content spelled out in California's subject matter standards. Students in grades 2-11 are tested in English/language arts and math. Students in grades 8, 10, and 11 also take history/social science CSTs. High school students take science CSTs, and a 5th grade science test will be added in 2004. CSTs are primarily multiple choice but 4th and 7th graders also take a writing test. Scores indicate how well a student has mastered state standards. The state has set a series of proficiency levels under which student scores are categorized, in relation to the standards, as either far below basic, below basic, basic, proficient, or advanced. Tests scored this way are "criterion-referenced."

California Achievement Test (CAT-6). The CAT-6 is a norm-referenced test — it measures how students compare to the U.S. norm, derived from a national sample of students. In California's evolving system, the CAT-6 replaces its predecessor, the SAT-9. It allows for national comparisons but is not fully aligned to California's standards.

California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE). Scores on the CAHSEE are included in the API for high schools. The CAHSEE, which tests English/language arts and mathematics, differs from the other state exams in that it carries consequences not just for schools, but for each high school student. As of the graduating class of 2006, students will have to pass the CAHSEE to be eligible for a high school diploma. An exam with such high stakes for students has been controversial in California, as in other states following this path. A major concern is that in too many cases, a student's failure to pass the exam is the fault of the system, not the student, since many schools have not provided students with sufficient opportunities to learn what is required to pass. Yielding to this argument, the State Board of Education deferred the date when the exam would count, which had originally been 2004.

California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA). Added in spring 2003, CAPA is an alternative assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities who cannot participate in the general STAR program assessments, even with accommodations or modifications. A student's Individualized Education Plan specifies whether he or she should take CAPA and thus work toward achieving a subset of the state academic standards. Fewer than one percent of the state's students take this exam. CAPA performance replaces CST performance for accountability purposes.

to a low of 200. Under the current goal of raising all schools to 800, the emphasis is on annual growth. Schools must move up each year by at least 5 percent of the distance between their present API score and 800. Growth targets also must be met for each numerically significant ethnic and socioeconomic subgroup at each school.

Statewide school rankings under the API are broadly publicized, creating much pressure on schools to improve. Originally, schools that met their performance targets were eligible for monetary rewards, a program now suspended due to budget cuts. Schools that ranked in the bottom half statewide and failed to meet growth targets qualified for state assistance under the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP). Once in the program, schools became subject to sanctions, including takeover or closure, if they still did not improve. II/USP has now been supplemented by the High Priority Schools Grant Program, which focuses assistance on the state's lowest-performing schools.

With the enactment of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2002, California began aligning its system with that law's accountability mandates. Under NCLB, not only each school, but each school district and the state as a whole must make adequate yearly progress (AYP) – defined by each state with federal approval – toward meeting state standards. (See figure 2.) A major change for schools under NCLB is an emphasis on reaching uniform

FIGURE 2: AYP in California

Under the state's new NCLB-aligned accountability plan, California's API is now part of AYP.

The four criteria adopted in 2003 by the California State Board of Education for making adequate yearly progress (AYP) under NCLB apply to districts, schools, and numerically significant subgroups:

1. Meet Annual Measurable Objectives in English/language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Objectives have been established statewide for all schools and will be raised over time (beginning in 2004–05) to fulfill the federal mandate that all students in all schools reach proficiency by 2014.
 - » For K-8, given percentages of students must achieve at the proficient or advanced levels on the CSTs. The current percentages are 13.6 for ELA and 16 for mathematics.
 - » For high schools, given percentages of students must score proficient on the California High School Exit Examination (administered to 10th graders). Current percentages are 11.2 for ELA and 9.6 for mathematics.
 - » These targets must be achieved schoolwide and for all significant subgroups.
2. Demonstrate a 95 percent participation rate on assessments in ELA and mathematics — again, schoolwide and for all significant subgroups.
3. Demonstrate progress on the API (see figure 1). Schools must show at least a one-point improvement or have an API of at least 560. This will start going up in 2004–05 to move schools toward achieving 800 on the API by 2014.
4. Demonstrate progress on the graduation rate of high school students.

achievement levels each year, rather than on registering growth. The state now sets specific performance targets in English/language arts (ELA) and mathematics (for example, x percent of students must score "proficient") that apply to all schools, regardless of their past performance. Targets will move higher over time to fulfill the federally mandated goal of all students proficient by 2014.

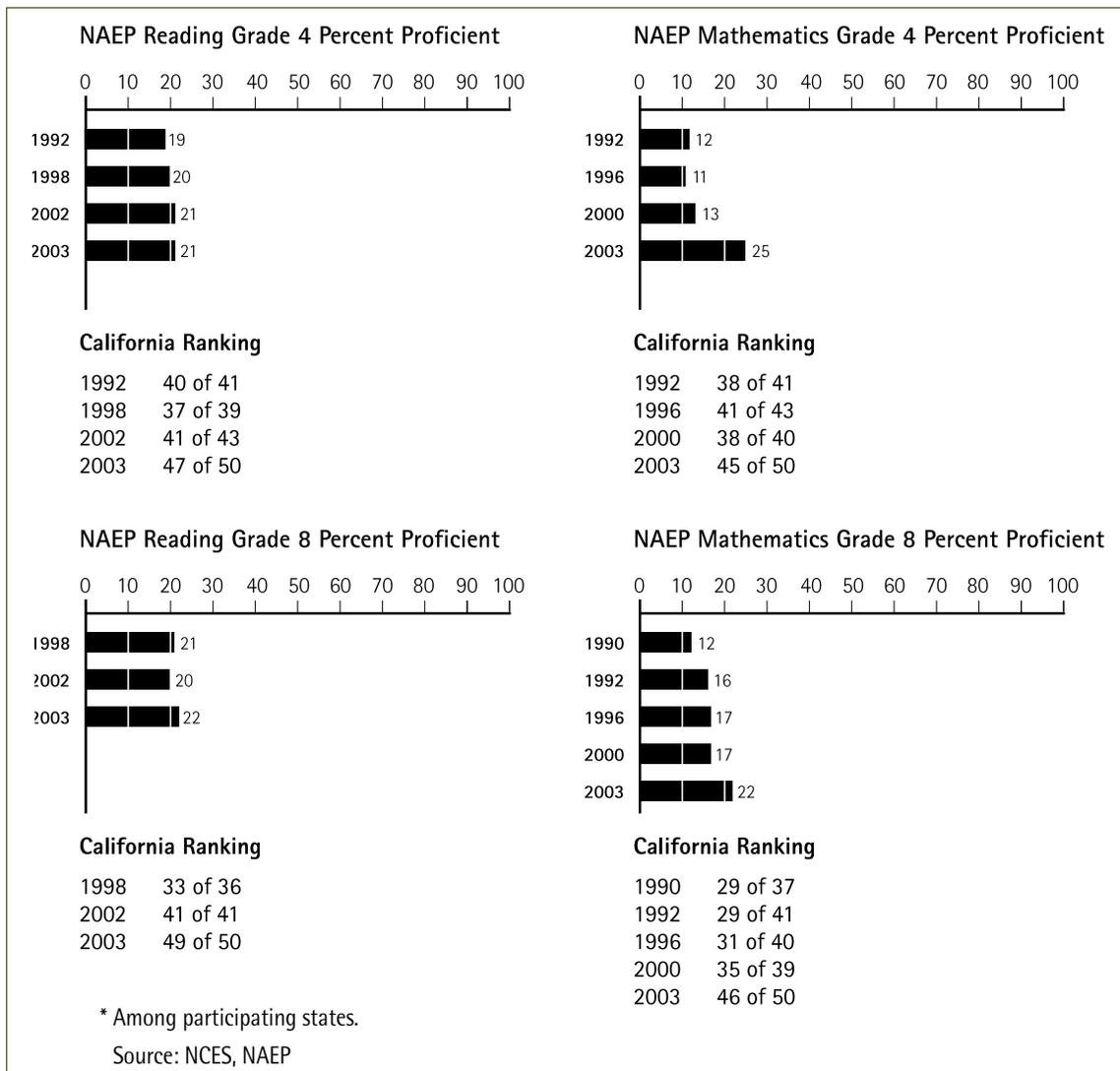
Similarly to California's law, NCLB stipulates that test results must be broken out by sub-categories, but besides racial and ethnic groups and economically disadvantaged students, NCLB adds students with disabilities and English learners. NCLB also mandates that 95 percent of students in each subcategory participate in testing. And the state's report of its AYP must include progress in improving the high school graduation rate – a rate whose calculation has been problematic nationwide (see companion brief, "California's Graduation Rate: The Hidden Crisis").

Are Accountability Reforms Working? Progress Is Steady But Too Slow

WestEd's analysis of student achievement results from the array of state and national tests taken by California students over the past decade leads to four key conclusions:

1. **California continues to rank at or near the bottom among states in the nation's assessment of education progress, yet the lag is not profound.** (See Figure 3.) NAEP provides one tool for comparing across states. Since 1969, NAEP tests in reading, writing, mathematics, science, history, geography, and foreign language have been administered periodically by the U.S. Department of Education in states opting to participate.¹ California has always participated, and though recent results still show

FIGURE 3: California Reading and Mathematics NAEP Scores



the state at or near the bottom nationwide, the nation's performance overall is poor. For example, while 25 percent of California's 4th graders scored at the proficient level in mathematics in 2003, the national average was only 32 percent. The difference appears smaller still when California's record of fast-changing demographics is taken into account (see figure 12, p. 10).

Nonetheless, NAEP scores help underscore the need to step up the pace of improvement gains.

» *In reading as well as mathematics, fewer than 30 percent of students reach proficiency.*

For the past decade, California students have shown notable gains in mathematics. Yet in 2003 in mathematics, only 25 percent of 4th graders were proficient, ranking the state 45th out of 50. Among 8th graders, 22 percent were proficient, meaning a rank of 46th out of 50.

Since the 1994 point of alarm over 4th grade reading scores, those scores have inched up. From 38th among 39 participating states in 1994, California ranked 47 out of 50 in 2003.

2. The state's strategy appears to be working. Over time, steady increases occur across all groups, with the lowest-performing groups in some cases showing the largest increases. This pattern is evident in both CST scores (now spanning two years) and SAT-9 scores (spanning the previous four years). Between 2002 and 2003, in the majority of grades, for example, CST scores for economically disadvantaged students improved more than they did for their more advantaged peers.²

3. Despite these increases, overall achievement remains too low.

» The highest overall proportion of students in *any* grade reaching proficiency on the 2003 CST exam in mathematics was only 53 percent (for 2nd graders). In ELA it was 39 percent (for 4th graders). (See Figures 4 and 5.)

» On the API in 2003, 78 percent of the state's schools met their growth targets. Just 21.7 percent achieved the state goal of 800 or higher. Only 7.4 percent of high schools reached that goal. High schools have become a particular focus of attention; although they have improved, the gains are miniscule.³ (See Figure 6.)

4. Significant gaps between different groups of students persist.

» *Racial/ethnic gaps.* Across all grades, students identified as Asian, Filipino, and White reach proficiency on the CST in much larger proportions than do African American, Latino, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander students. NAEP scores reiterate this gap. (See figures 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11.)

FIGURE 4: California Standards Test
Mathematics
Percent Reaching Proficiency

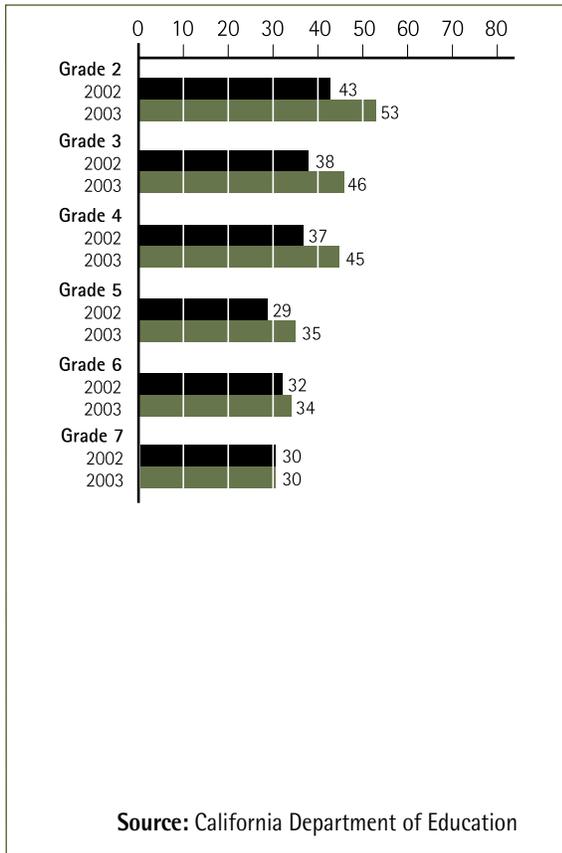
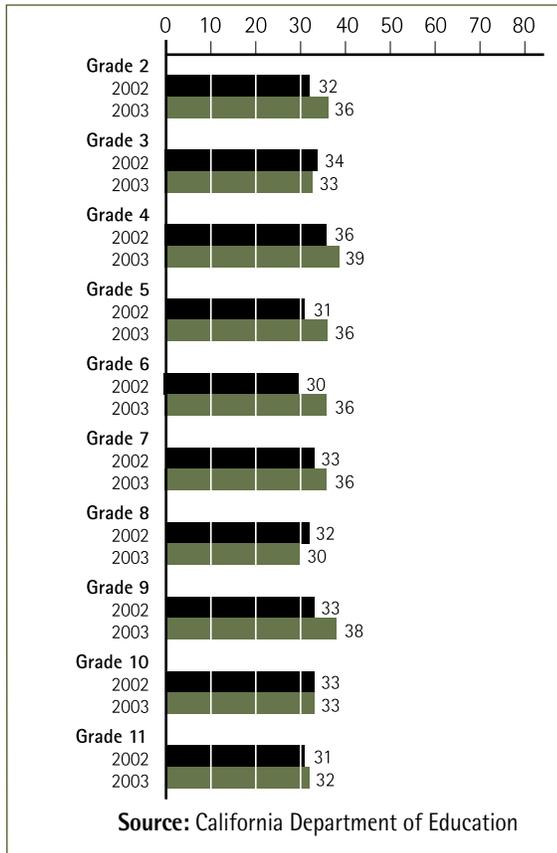


FIGURE 5: California Standards Test
English Language Arts
Percent Reaching Proficiency



- » *English learner and special needs gaps.* English learners and students with disabilities reach proficiency on the CST at much lower rates than their counterparts.
- » *Poverty gap.* While the CST scores of economically disadvantaged students increased from 2002 to 2003, the *smallest* gap between these low-income students and their more affluent peers in ELA in 2003 was 24 percentage points for 11th graders. In most grades, that gap was greater than 30 percentage points. (See Figures 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9.)

FIGURE 6: Percent of California Schools
At or Above API of 800

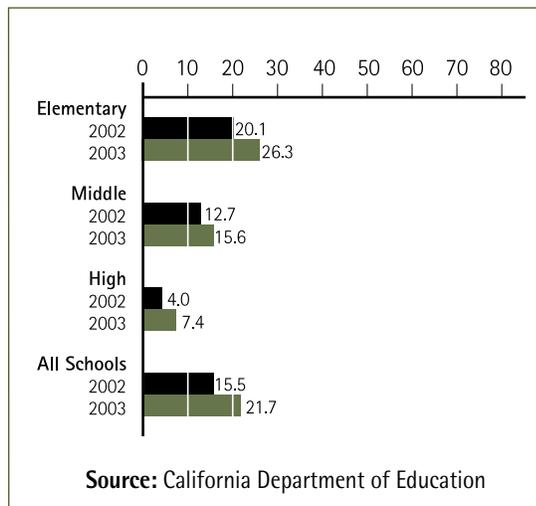


FIGURE 7: California Standards Test
English Language Arts Grade 4
Percent Reaching Proficiency

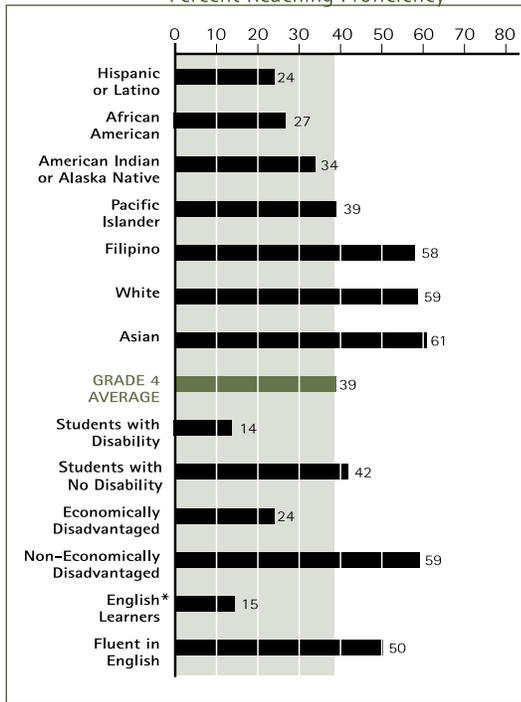


FIGURE 8: California Standards Test
Mathematics Grade 4
Percent Reaching Proficiency

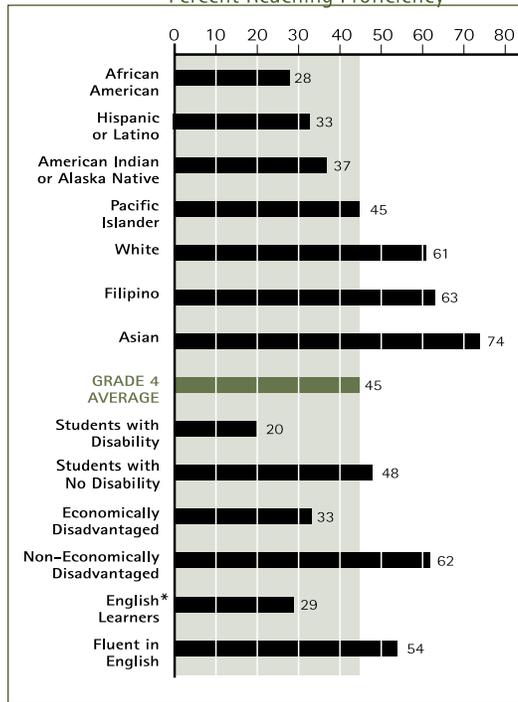


FIGURE 9: California Standards Test
English Language Arts Grade 7
Percent Reaching Proficiency

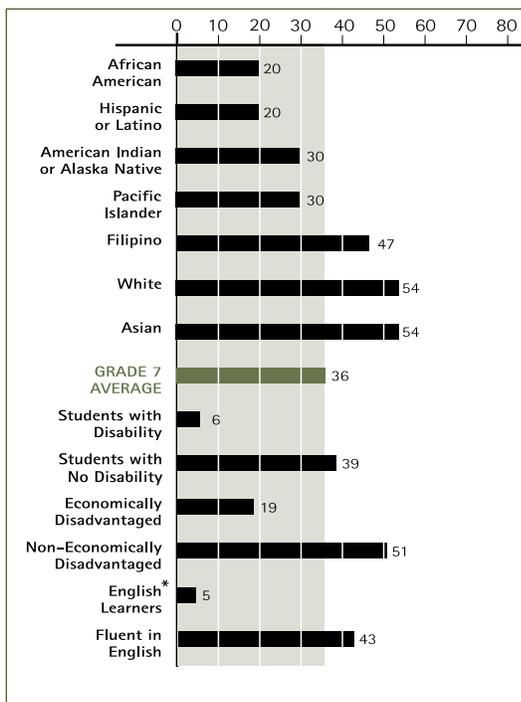
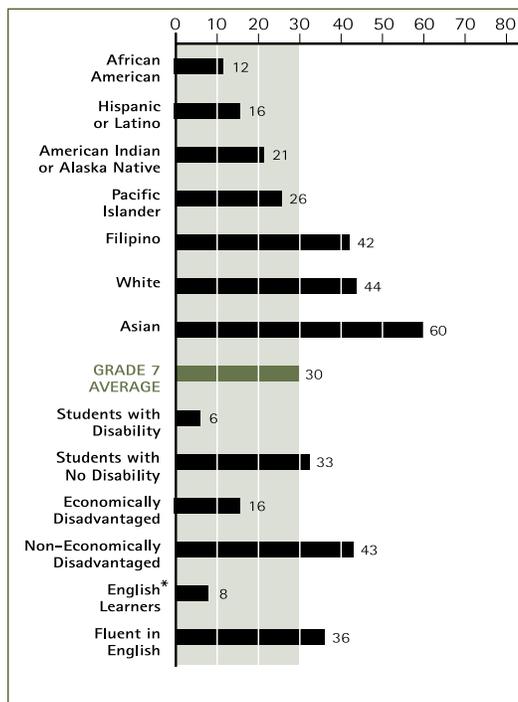


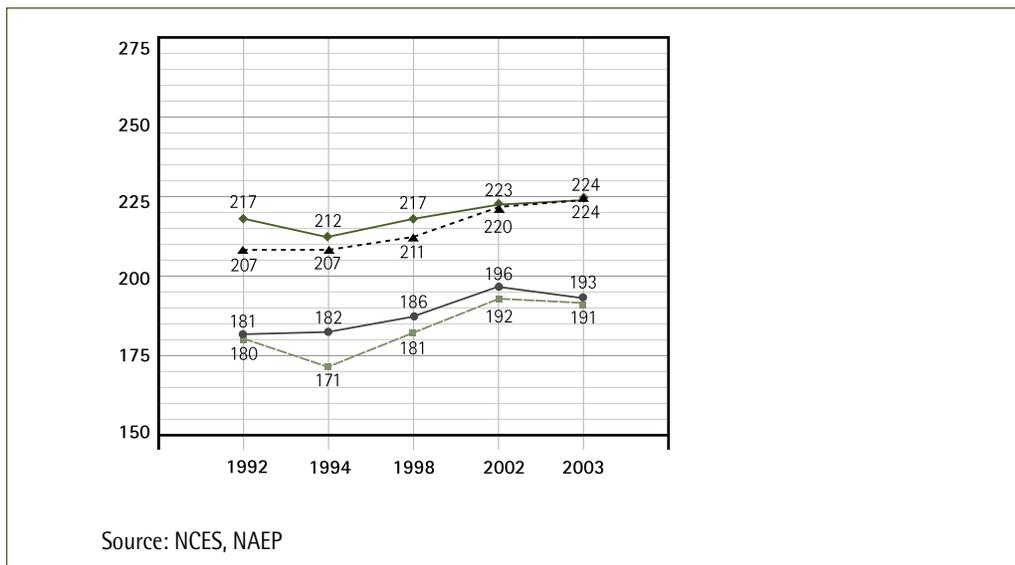
FIGURE 10: California Standards Test
Mathematics Grade 7
Percent Reaching Proficiency



Source for figures 8-10: California Department of Education, 2003 data.

* Data are for English Learners enrolled for 12+ months.

FIGURE 11: California NAEP Average Scale Scores By Ethnic Group
Grade 4 Reading



- » *NAEP scores reiterate the persistent achievement gap, with Latino and African American students scoring lower than their white, Asian, and Pacific Islander peers.*

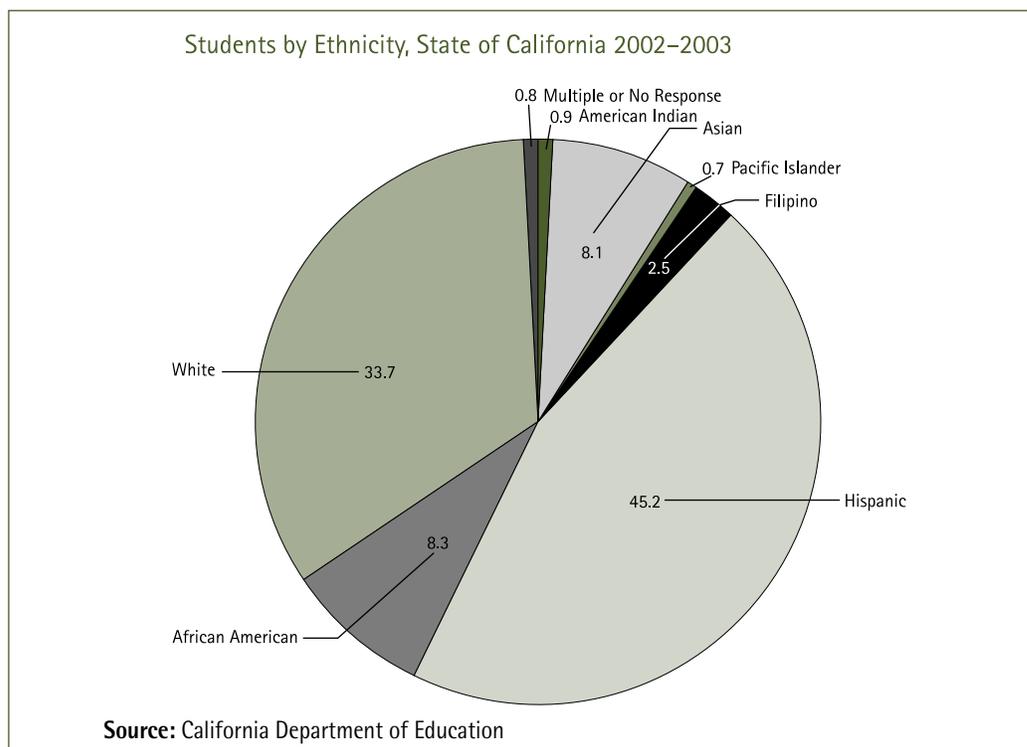
Final Notes

Since the nadir of 1994, California has enacted dramatic and hard-won reforms. The evolving accountability system has prompted a much stronger focus in schools and districts on student achievement and, in turn, numerous reforms. The resultant five-year progression of achievement gains, with 78 percent of the state's schools meeting their growth targets, is no small feat.

Despite these impressive gains, there is a need to ignite a much faster improvement pace, especially for Latino and African American students. Underscoring the urgency is a demographic watershed: this spring, for the first time, the state's high school graduating class includes as many Latino and African American students as non-Hispanic whites.⁴ Within a decade, it is expected that these groups will constitute an absolute majority of graduates.

Add to this the reality that alarming numbers of Latino and African American students never graduate from high school (see companion brief) and it becomes clear that closing the racial and ethnic achievement gap — long a matter of fairness and equity — is also a central issue for the state's future economic and social viability.

Figure 12: Demographics in California's Schools



Two trends over the last 20 years – dramatic enrollment growth and burgeoning diversity – make California's public education challenges more complex than those in many other states.

Enrollment. During much of the 1980s and 1990s, the state experienced explosive enrollment growth. For example, for each of the years between 1994 and 2000, enrollment increased by more than 100,000 students – the equivalent of adding, every year, a school system larger than that of Long Beach.⁵ By contrast, during the same period, some other states lost enrollment. In 2003-04, projected California enrollment is 6.2 million students, up from 5.2 million in 1994.

Diversity. For more than a decade, no group has constituted a majority in California's schools. Latino students are now the largest group.

Endnotes

¹ As of spring 2003, participation in reading and mathematics is mandatory under NCLB.

² For data by grade and subject, see CDE STAR reports or contact WestEd.

³ In response to data showing that high school improvement is lagging, CDE has launched an initiative to give high schools the same types of focused, comprehensive assistance given to elementary and middle schools.

⁴ Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, *Knocking at the College Door, Projections of High School Graduates by State, Income, and Race/Ethnicity*, December 2003.

⁵ Source: California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Unit – CBEDS.