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May 24, 2006

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Statement by Russlynn Ali, Director of the Education Trust-West, on Today's Release of NAEP 2005 Science Data

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Today, the National Center for Education Statistics released results from the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in science for 4th, 8th, and 12 grades. There is some promising news for California.

First, California students are improving in science, at rates higher than the nation as a whole. In fact, California's Latino and low-income 4th grade students improved more than their counterparts in almost every state. Improvement for our low-income students tied with Georgia and outpaced all other states. And for our Latino students, improvement rates tied with Virginia and were higher than every other state. Our 8th graders are improving too, and performed better than their predecessors when NAEP science was last administered in 2000 (grade 12 data is not available at the state level).

These gains are particularly important *now*. Myths about student learning abound. Many say that California's concentrated focus on reading and math, in part due to new federal accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, means a narrowing of the curriculum – that students are forced into drill and kill environments inundated with reading and math instruction that ignore other disciplines. These data today dispel those assumptions. Science is not being ignored. Improvement, especially in the early grades, is happening across the board: reading, math and now in science, too.

Best yet: the achievement gap in science is narrowing. California's state and local focus on good instruction and the needs of California's traditionally lowest performing students is finally paying off. The higher levels of achievement reported today are a testament to the hard work and resolve of the educators and students who've held the line on California's standards, embraced the challenge and kept at it.

While we applaud the gains California has made – and remain hopeful that we're on the right course – we cannot ignore the sobering news about our state revealed today. Despite the gains and really exciting levels of improvement, California remains among the lowest performing states in both 4th and 8th grade science. Almost every other state is performing better than we are. In 4th grade, California ranks 43rd out of 44 states; in 8th

grade we're 42nd out of 44 states. Indeed, Mississippi is the only state that had a lower average scale score in 4th grade science. Even when we look only at statistically significant differences in scale scores, California is still among the lowest performing states in the nation.

Quite frankly, this is plain scandalous. We are the 5th largest economy in the world, but we won't stay that way unless we transform the way our schools work. We have the know-how. The lingering question is whether we have the courage to create the civic will necessary to serve our students better.

Only 17% of California's 4th graders are proficient or advanced in science and a full half (50%) of California's 4th graders are still below basic. In eighth grade, 18% of California's students are proficient or advanced and 56% are below basic. When we look underneath those averages, the data is even more distressing—74% of Black 8th graders and 73% of Latino 8th graders are performing at below basic.

At a time when the demand for advanced math and science knowledge and skills is increasing exponentially, California students are woefully underprepared to compete with their peers across the country, let alone the rest of the world. We can and should do more to improve science instruction in the early grades, prepare our middle school students for a rigorous high school science curriculum and then make sure they have access to those rigorous classes once in high school and finally, ensure that all students have their fair share of our most effective teachers, as well as proper science labs and facilities to ensure student learning is adequately supported.

About the Education Trust-WestThe Education Trust—West is the West Coast partner of the national policy organization the Education Trust. The organization works for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels, kindergarten through college with an emphasis on serving low-income, Latino, African-American and Native American students. The Education Trust—West works alongside policymakers, parents, education professionals, and business and community leaders, in cities and towns throughout California, who are trying to transform their schools and colleges into institutions that genuinely serve all students. To learn more about the Education Trust—West, visit www.edtrustwest.org.

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