SPECIAL REPORT

Achievement in California 2009:

PERSISTENT CHALLENGES AND PATHS FORWARD

AUGUST 2009

The Education Trust–West

Introduction

On Tuesday August 18th, the California Department of Education (CDE) released the 2009 student achievement data from the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program. These results paint a familiar picture and tell a well-known story to many across our state: California students continue to demonstrate small, gradual increases in academic achievement, especially in the early grades. Performance levels rise slowly, and the proportion of students performing to grade level tick incrementally upward.

All too often, the story ends there. We reaffirm—even occasionally celebrate—the status quo, and decide to continue doing only what we've always done. But what we've always done allows far too many low-income students and students of color to remain underestimated, under-taught, and underprepared for college and career. The racial and socioeconomic achievement gap exists across all subjects and remains largely unchanged over the past 7 years.

Together, Latino and African-American students comprise the single largest group of young people in California's schools, and yet, these students continue to be fundamentally short-changed by our public education system. Yes, some improvements have been made, and any progress deserves acknowledgement. But the importance of acknowledging what is working must not mask the reality about what is not.

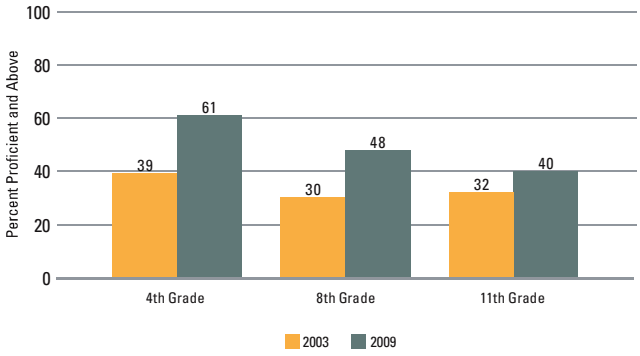
And the reality is, California's public schools are still not places of equitable opportunity and equitable academic outcomes for all students.

Progress in elementary grades; stagnation in high school

In 2009, California students demonstrated higher levels of academic achievement across more grade levels and content areas than at any point since 2003—the year when content standards became fully aligned with state assessments. Indeed, when compared to 2003 levels, 2009 California Standards Test (CST) data reveals that the state has made substantial progress in bringing an increasingly higher proportion of students to proficiency.

In English, moderate gains in student achievement can be seen across the critical 4th, 8th, and 11th grade levels. Improvement in English is particularly evident in the 4th grade, where nearly two-thirds of students met grade-level expectations. [See Figure 1].

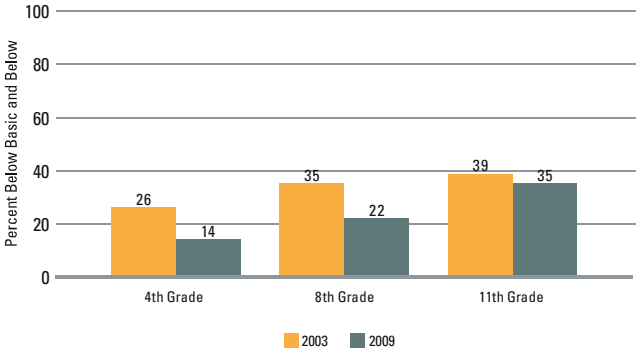
Figure 1: CST English-Language Arts Proficiency Across Grades (2003 & 2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

The proportion of students meeting or exceeding proficiency is only one indicator of academic progress. To gain an accurate picture of student achievement, we must also examine student movement out of the lowest levels of achievement. Recently released CST data demonstrates that educators across the state have made progress in reducing the proportion of students performing at the Below Basic and Far Below Basic levels. Here again, the most heartening results are seen in the 4th grade, where the proportion of students who did not achieve to even the Basic level has been nearly cut in half since 2003. [See Figure 2]. However, despite the progress made across all grade levels in improving proficiency rates, more than one-third of 11th graders still did not reach Basic levels of proficiency in English in 2009.

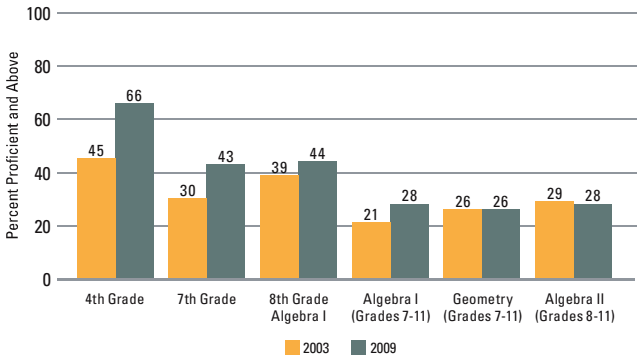
Figure 2: Students Not Reaching Basic CST English Language-Arts, Across Grades (2003 & 2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

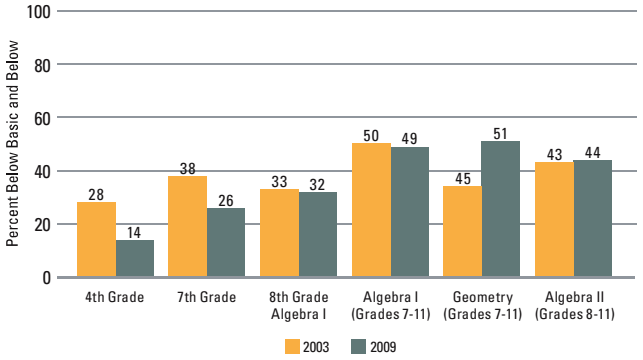
In mathematics, similar indicators of progress are evident at the elementary school level. Two-thirds of 4th graders were taught to proficiency (66%), and the proportion of 4th graders taught only to the Below and Far Below Basic level was half what it was in 2003 (14% compared to 28%) [See Figures 3 and 4].

Figure 3: CST Mathematics Proficiency Across Grades (2003 & 2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

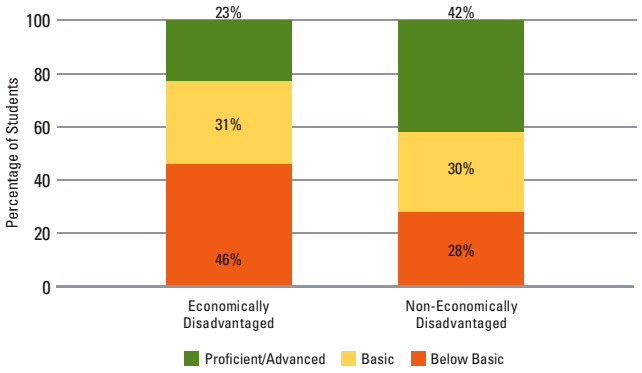
Figure 4: Students Not Reaching Basic CST Mathematics, Across Grades (2003 & 2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

In 7th grade mathematics, proficiency rates improved from 30% in 2003 to 43% in 2009 and the percentage of students not reaching proficiency decreased. However, these indicators of progress in mathematics are not evident in grades eight through 11. In 8th grade general mathematics, Latino students improved by one percentage point since 2008 (to 24% Proficient and Advanced), while African-American proficiency rates remained unchanged (20%), and proficiency rates among White students declined (from 45% to 43%). Among economically disadvantaged students, 46% did not achieve Basic levels of proficiency in 8th grade general math [see Figure 5].

Figure 5: CST 8th Grade General Math* Proficiency, by Economic Status (2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

**The General Math test assesses 6th and 7th grade math standards and is given to all students not enrolled in Algebra I in 8th grade.*

Proficiency rates have declined among 8th graders taking Algebra I. Absent too, is the evidence of movement out of the lowest levels of achievement. The proportion of students taught to only the Below Basic and Far Below Basic levels in Algebra I declined by only a single percentage point since 2003. In high school mathematics, proficiency rates have stagnated in Geometry (26%) and performance has declined in Algebra II [see Figures 3 & 4]. In Geometry and Algebra II, the rates of low achievement increased slightly over the past seven years. [See Figure 4].

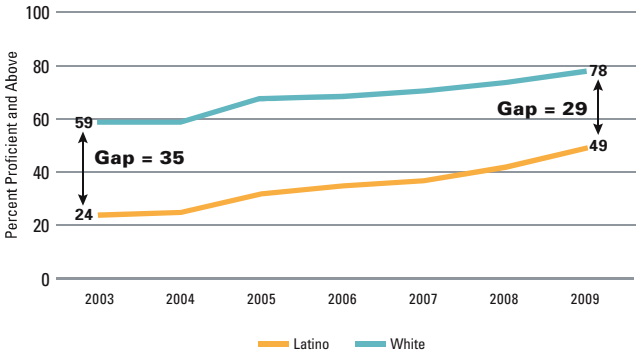
Achievement gaps persist… and widen

Large and pervasive gaps in achievement remain between low-income students and students of color, and their more advantaged peers. These gaps have been narrowing the fastest in 4th grade. All student groups made progress in English Language Arts, and Latino students grew the most, narrowing the gap between themselves and White students by six percentage points. [See Figure 6] In 4th grade math, the gap between African-American students and their White peers shrunk by six percentage points. [See Figure 7].

Middle and high schools have been demonstrably less successful than elementary schools in narrowing achievement gaps—high schools dramatically so.

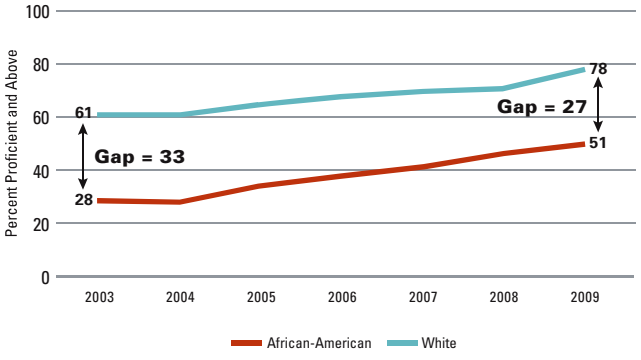
In middle schools, the gaps between Latino and White students in 8th grade English-Language Arts have remained unchanged since 2003. The gaps between African-American and White students have actually grown from 2003-2009. The proportion of White 8th graders achieving proficiency in 2009 was 32 percentage points higher than Latino and African-American 8th graders. [See Figures 8 & 9].

Figure 6: CST 4th Grade English-Language Arts Latino-White Gap



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

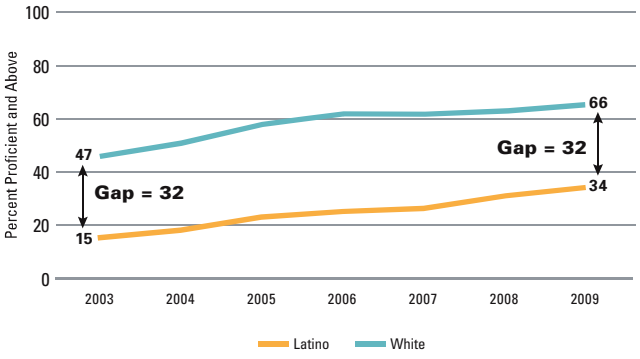
Figure 7: CST 4th Grade Mathematics African American-White Gap



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

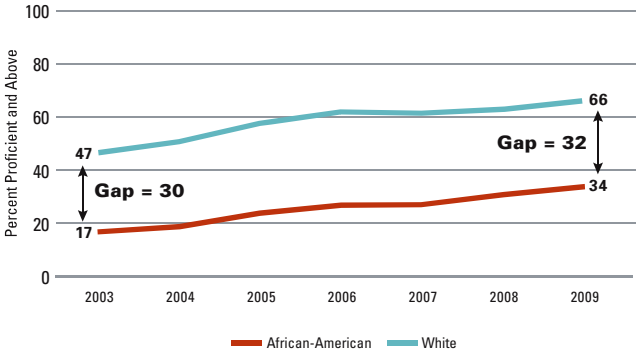
Despite moderate improvement in narrowing achievement gaps, the disparities remain extensive nonetheless. Nearly thirty percentage points separate the proportion of White students performing to grade level expectations in 4th grade English from the proportion of Latino and African-American students reaching the Basic level of proficiency.

Figure 8: CST 8th Grade English-Language Arts Latino-White Gap



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

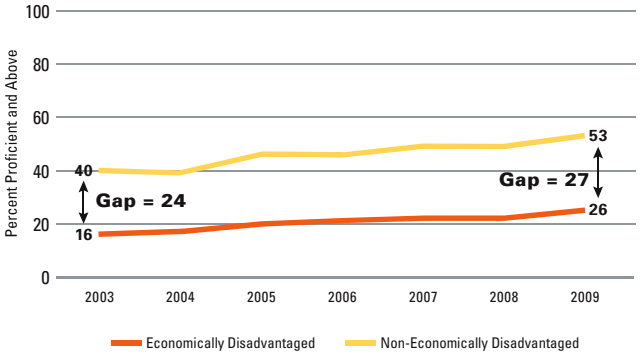
Figure 9: CST 8th Grade English-Language Arts African American-White Gap



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

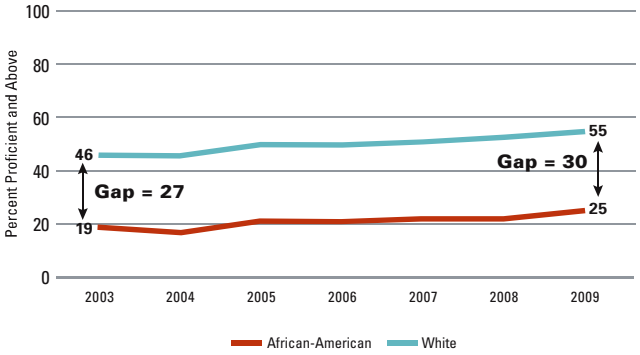
In 11th grade English, the gaps separating low-income students from their non-economically disadvantaged peers grew by three percentage points since 2003. [See Figure 10]. An identical three percentage point gap increase exists between African-American and White 11th graders. White students reach proficiency in English at rates 30 percentage points higher than their African-American peers. [See Figure 11].

Figure 10: CST 11th Grade English-Language Arts Poverty Gap



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

Figure 11: CST 11th Grade English-Language Arts African American-White Gap

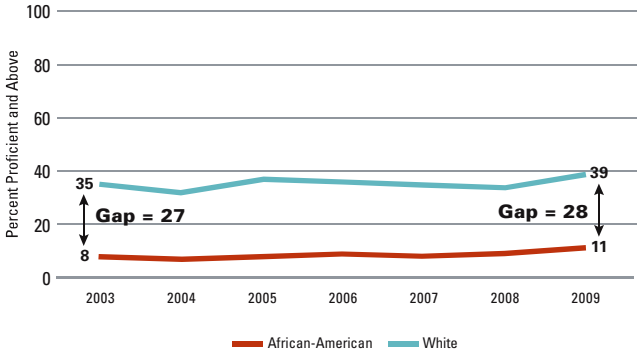


Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data

Gaps have remained stagnant, or grown wider in the various high school math courses. Twenty-eight percentage points separate African-Americans reaching proficiency in Geometry from their White peers—a gap that has widened by one percentage point since 2003. [See Figure 12].

In Algebra II, a course all students must successfully complete to be eligible to apply to any 4-year public university in California, student achievement is not only low, but high schools have also been unable to make much headway in

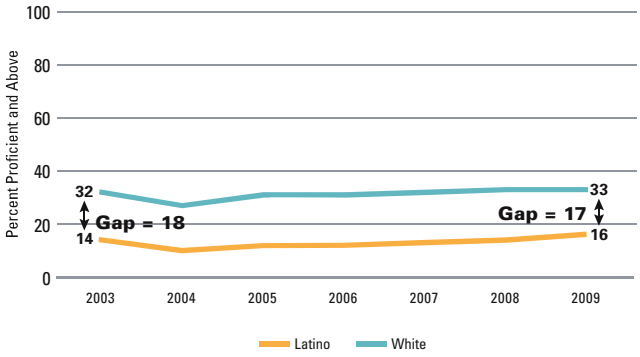
Figure 12: CST Geometry Grades 8-11 African American-White Gap (2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data

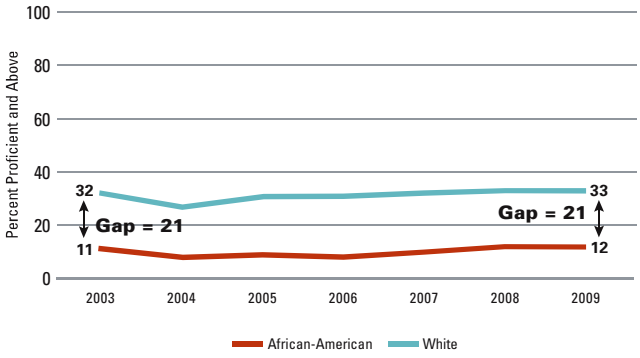
narrowing gaps. White students reach proficiency in Algebra II at much higher rates than their Latino and African-American peers—17 and 21 percentage points higher, respectively. [See Figures 13 & 14] These disparities in achievement have remained largely unchanged since 2003.

Figure 13: CST Algebra II Grades 8-11 Latino-White Gap (2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

Figure 14: CST Algebra II Grades 8-11 African American-White Gap



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data

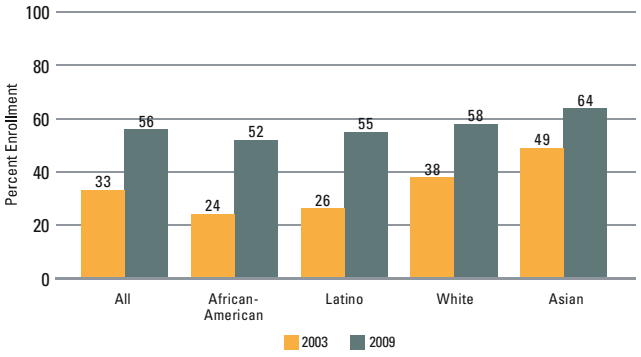
Some good news in Algebra I

In July of 2008, the State Board of Education decided that only the Algebra I California Standards Test (CST) would count as the 8th grade math assessment for federal accountability purposes. Their decision upheld California's pre-existing designation of Algebra I as the 8th grade math goal, and set in motion a timetable for all 8th graders to take this math course in the near future.

To us, as to many, the logic behind the Board's decision was simple: California cannot continue to wax eloquent about high standards for all students, while providing equitable access only to some. Our standards must be for all students. Still, the decision sparked heated controversy and a chorus of voices that insisted neither our teachers nor our students would be up to the challenge.

In the 2008-2009 school year, a higher percentage of 8th graders were enrolled in Algebra I than in any previous year (54%). Moreover, these enrollment patterns remained relatively consistent across different student groups. [See Figure 15].

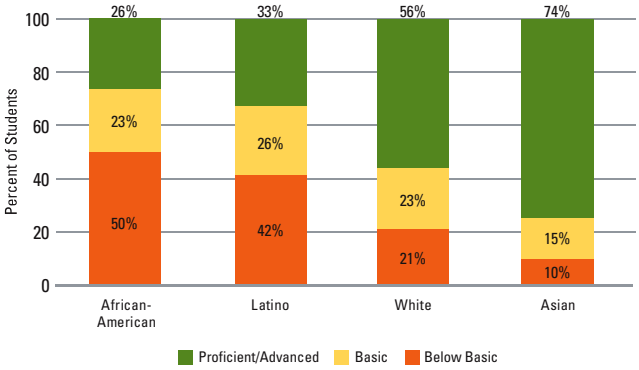
Figure 15: 8th Grade Algebra I Enrollment, by Ethnicity (2003 & 2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

Simply providing access to this critical content is of course not enough. While access to Algebra I has become far more equitable in our state, academic outcomes are not. More than half of White 8th graders (56%) and nearly three-fourths of Asian 8th graders (74%) enrolled in Algebra I achieved proficiency, compared to a third of Latino (33%) and approximately one-quarter (26%) of African-American 8th graders. This reveals an astounding 48 percentage point gap in Algebra I achievement between Asian and African-American 8th graders. Similarly, White 8th graders had more than double the rate of Algebra proficiency as African-American 8th graders. [See Figure 16].

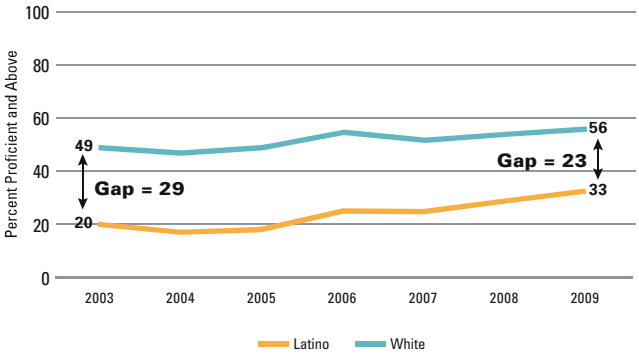
Figure 16: CST 8th Grade Algebra I, by Ethnicity (2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

At the same time, some gaps are narrowing. While slow and incremental, the achievement gaps separating Latino and African-American 8th graders in Algebra I from their White peers are narrowing at rates greater than in every other end-of-course mathematics subject area. In particular, the gap separating Latino and White 8th graders has shrunk six percentage points since 2003. [See Figure 17]. As more and more students gain access to this critical course, we must now do more to ensure these students are taught to proficiency.

Figure 17: CST 8th Grade Algebra I Latino-White Gap



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

It doesn't have to be this way

These data paint a sobering picture. Statewide, low-income students and students of color continue to lag behind their White, Asian, and more affluent peers in every grade level and content area. Gaps are narrowing slowly, while in some places, gaps remain unchanged or grow wider.

For far too many adults, these data confirm the antiquated and wrong-headed notions about the underlying causes of the achievement gap. Rationalizations such as, "They're too poor," or "Their families don't care enough," or currently, "Our state is too poor," reaffirm the dangerous myth that demographics determine destiny in education. They do not.

Let us be clear: Yes, all of the non-school factors matter. But let us also be clear in acknowledging that rather than creating a system of public education to ameliorate the potentially limiting demographic factors and ensuring the success of all students, we have designed a system that exacerbates the demographic disparities present in larger society. We take young people who have less to begin with, and we give these children less of everything that matters in education, including less school funding, fewer highly-qualified teachers, and less access to rigorous coursework. When low achievement results, too many adults insist that schools can never overcome these hurdles.

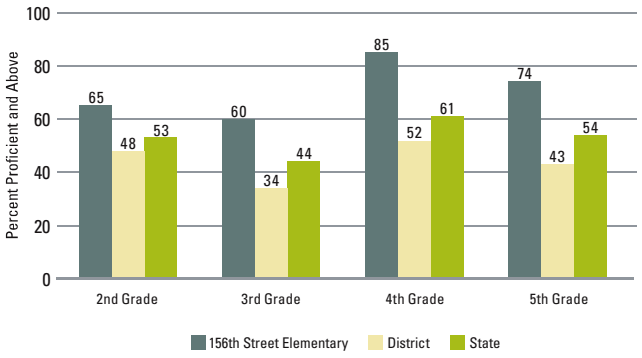
But some schools are overcoming those hurdles. Every day, dedicated and skilled professional educators across California reaffirm what research continues to tell us about the primary importance of teaching, and dispel damaging myths about the causes and consequences of low achievement. While serving predominantly low-income students of color, the academic success of the following three "Dispelling the Myth" schools demonstrate that public schools in urban communities can educate all students to the highest levels, regardless of students' racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. More importantly, these schools show us that California should not accept low performance among low-income students of color and minimal improvements in closing the persistent achievement gap. These schools are shining examples that low proficiency rates and achievement gaps are not inevitable, and all students and schools are capable of high levels of academic achievement.

Dispelling The Myth: 156th Street Elementary School, Los Angeles Unified School District

- Located in Gardena, California
- K-5 serving 316 students
- 49% Latino, 15% Asian, 15% White, 14% African-American
- 58% Economically Disadvantaged
- 17% English Language Learners

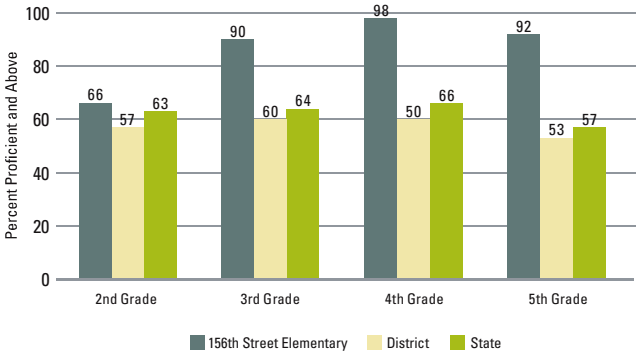
In every grade level and content area, students at 156th Street outperform their peers in LAUSD and across California. [See Figures 18 & 19]. These gains begin early, with nearly two-thirds of 2nd graders meeting grade level expectations in English (65%) and math (66%). These achievements persist across the upper elementary grades. In 4th grade math, 98 percent of 156th Street students reached proficiency. [See Figure 19].

Figure 18: One Hundred Fifty-Sixth Street Elementary School CST ELA Proficiency by Grade (2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

Figure 19: One Hundred Fifty-Sixth Street Elementary School CST Math Proficiency by Grade (2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

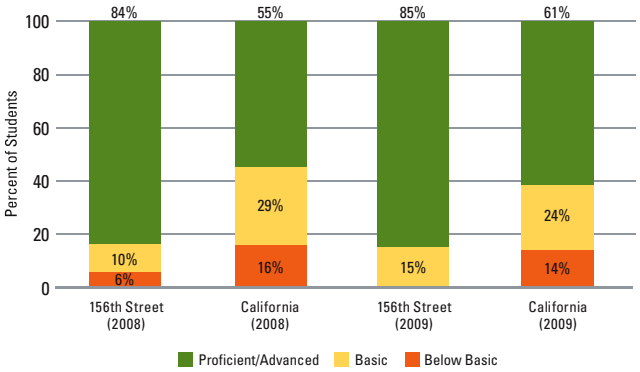
Among Latino 4th graders at 156th Street, 94% were proficient in math and 81% were proficient in English, far surpassing the state average for Latino students (56% and 49%, respectively). Similarly, economically-disadvantaged students at 156th Street significantly outperformed the state average in English by 32 percentage points (80% to 48%) and by 28 percentage points in math (84% to 56%).

Principal Esther Kim emphasizes the importance of teachers and their hard work in bringing about these results. "Whatever teachers need for instruction, we make sure they have it," Kim says. "This is our top priority."

At 156th Street, teachers plan curriculum together, and discuss interventions as a team. They maintain consistent communication with families, reporting frequently on student progress. In addition, they have designed and implemented an afterschool program targeting low-performing students—those at the Basic level and below.

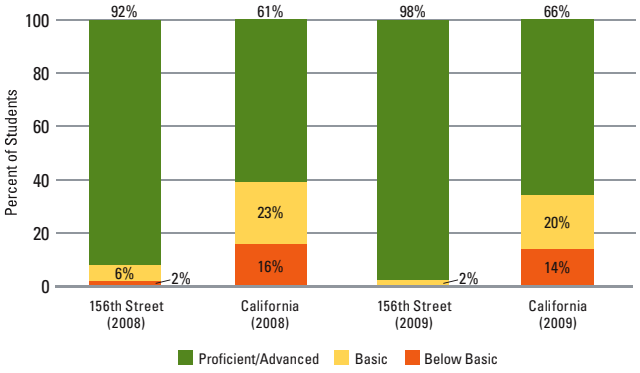
This focus on teaching all students is clearly evident. In 2009, zero percent of 4th graders at 156th Street performed at Below and Far Below Basic levels in English-Language Arts and math. Statewide, 14 percent of 4th graders were taught to this low level. [See Figures 20 & 21].

Figure 20: One Hundred Fifty-Sixth Street Elementary School Surpassing State Performance in ELA (4th Grade CST Data, 2008 & 2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

Figure 21: One Hundred Fifty-Sixth Street Elementary School Surpassing State Performance in Mathematics (4th Grade CST Data, 2008 & 2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

"All students are important to us," says Kim. "We focus on where the students are and the right type of interventions for all students… We try to personalize each student's academic experience and meet them where their needs are."

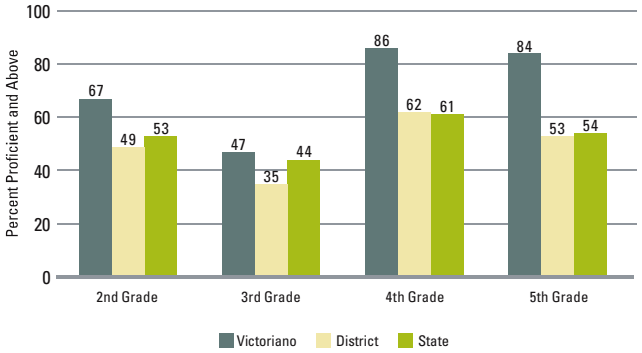
Dispelling The Myth: Victoriano Elementary

- Located in Moreno Valley, CA
- K-5 serving 513 students
- 49% Latino, 28% African-American, 11% White
- 62% Economically Disadvantaged
- 15% English Language Learners

The students at Victoriano have consistently demonstrated academic performance across content areas that exceed both district and state averages. In English, for example, 86 percent and 84 percent of 4th and 5th graders meet grade level expectations, respectively, compared to 61 percent and 54 percent of 4th and 5th graders across California. [See Figure 22]. In math, where performance is higher, Victoriano students consistently reach proficiency at rates significantly higher than their peers in Val Verde and statewide. Achievement is highest in 5th grade math, where nearly every student (98%) reached proficiency. [See Figure 23].

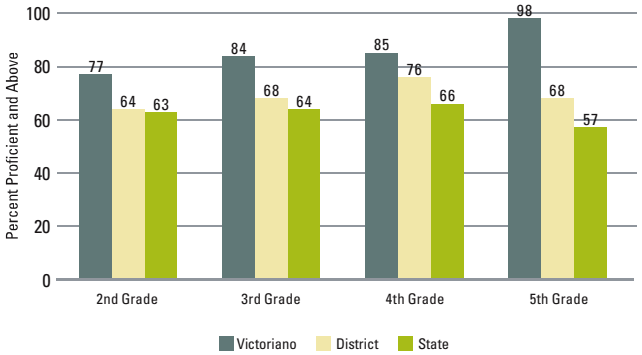
Principal Rick Aleksak attributes the high level of achievement among students at Victoriano Elementary to several practices. "We are a data driven school…with trimester formative and summative assessments we use to drive instruction in the classroom, that help us determine what students needs are. We meet at the end of each trimester in grade level teams to analyze the data, and plan accordingly, and we work together as professional learning communities to create strategies and plans to meet the needs of all students," he states. In addition, Victoriano Elementary also focuses heavily on collaboration between teachers, sharing best practices in instructional strategies, and modifying practices to improve student outcomes.

Figure 22: Victoriano Elementary School CST ELA Proficiency by Grade (2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

Figure 23: Victoriano Elementary School CST Math Proficiency by Grade (2009)



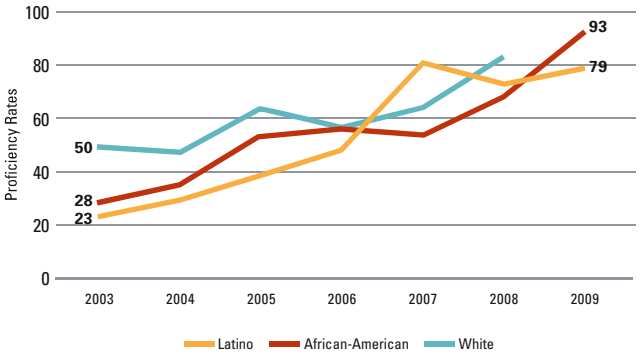
Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

"We have high expectations for all kids, and we do whatever it takes to get students "over the bar" to proficiency," states Rick Aleksak. It is clear that high expectations and data-driven instruction are highly effective, especially when examining the noteworthy academic performance by subgroups at Victoriano Elementary.

English proficiency rates for African-American students (93%), Latino students (79%), and economically-disadvantaged students (80%) are significantly higher than the California state average (49%). Among African-American students, 96% reached proficiency in science and 83% were proficient in math. Latino students also performed significantly higher than their peers across California, with proficiency rates in math and science of 88% and 86%, respectively.

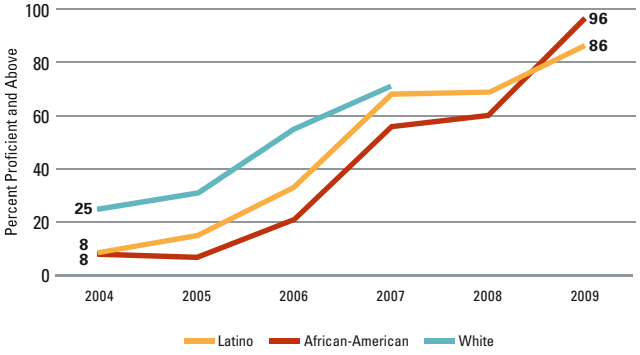
At Victoriano, not only has academic achievement continued to grow, but gaps in achievement are small. In 4th grade English-Language Arts for example, proficiency rates remain above state and district average for all students, with only small differences between students groups. [See Figure 24] In addition, Victoriano has demonstrated rapid, remarkable growth in proficiency rates in English and Math since 2003. For example, African-American student proficiency has improved by 56 percentage points in English since 2003, and Latino math achievement has improved by 53 percentage points [See Figure 24]. This achievement growth is more than twice the rate of improvement across California. In 5th grade Science, achievement has also increased dramatically for all students, particularly Latino and African-American students. [See Figure 25].

Figure 24: Victoriano Elementary School CST 4th Grade ELA, by Ethnicity Proficiency Scores Over Time, 2003-2009



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

Figure 25: Victoriano Elementary School CST 5th Grade Science, by Ethnicity Proficiency Scores Over Time, 2004-2008



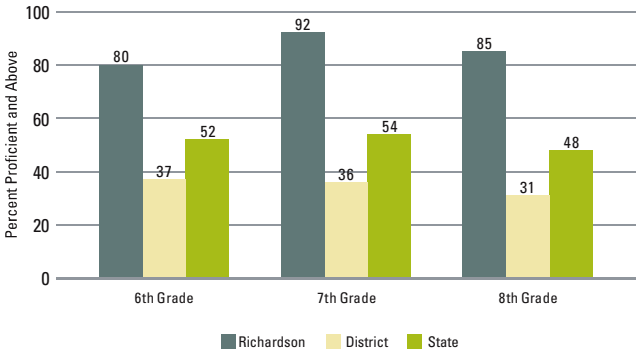
Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

Dispelling The Myth: Richardson Prep Hi

- Located in San Bernardino, CA
- Middle School (6-8), serving 614 students
- 64% Latino, 17% White, 13% African-American
- 71% Economically Disadvantaged

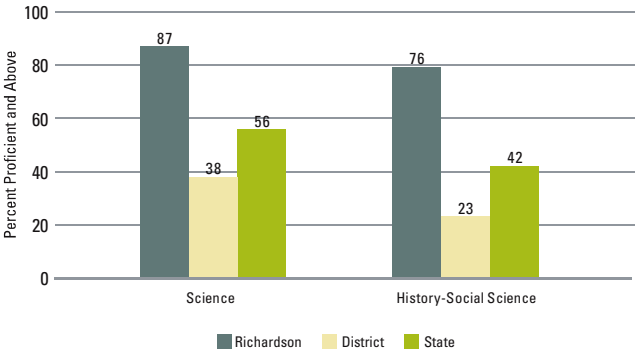
While Richardson Prep functions as a school of choice within San Bernardino Unified, their test scores demonstrate high academic success among low-income students and students of color. In English-Language Arts, Richardson Prep 6th, 7th, and 8th graders reach proficiency at rates significantly higher than the state or district averages. Indeed, Richardson students more than doubled the English proficiency rates of their peers in San Bernardino Unified. [See Figure 26]. Among subgroups, 88% of African-American students and 81% of Latino students reached proficiency in English. Similar patterns exist in Science and Social studies—assessed in the 8th grade—where students have been taught to levels far beyond average performance in either the district or the state. [See Figure 27].

Figure 26: Richardson Prep Hi
CST ELA proficiency by Grade (2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

Figure 27: Richardson Prep Hi
CST Science & History Proficiency: Comparison Across School, District, and State (2009)

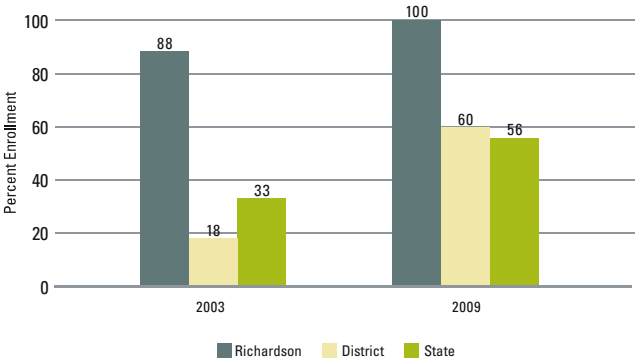


Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

Both current and former principals credit the high levels of achievement to the commitment of students and the focused preparation of teachers. Principal Natalie Raymundo stresses the importance of the professional development that is embedded in the weekly schedule. This is time set aside for teachers to collaborate, building a backward-mapped instructional plan and concentrating on articulation between grade levels.

The success of this approach is perhaps most apparent in mathematics. Richardson Prep began enrolling a high percentage of 8th graders in Algebra I or Geometry long before Algebra became a hot-button issue. Former principal Jim Kissinger said the decision came about because "it's what we needed to do to meet the needs of our kids." In 2009, 100 percent of Richardson 8th graders were enrolled in Algebra I or a higher level math course, nearly twice the state average. [See Figure 28].

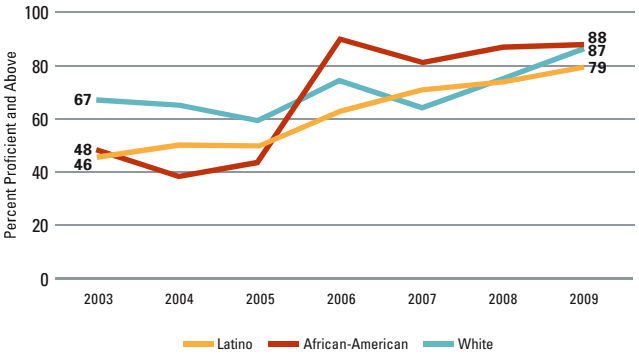
Figure 28: Richardson Prep Hi
8th Grade Algebra 1 Enrollment (2009)



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

And students are responding to these high expectations. More than three-fourths of 8th graders (77%) reached proficiency in 2009, and achievement gaps between student groups have been all but eliminated. [See Figure 29]. In particular, African-American and Latino students demonstrated high rates of proficiency in Algebra I (88% and 79% respectively).

Figure 29: Richardson Prep Hi
CST 8th Grade AlgebraProficiency Rates Over Time, 2003-2009



Source: Education Trust—West calculations of California Department of Education data.

Moving forward

Schools like 156th Street, Victoriano, and Richardson Prep help show us what is possible. The success of their teachers, students, and families reaffirm the power and potential of schools, and remind us that the patterns of low-achievement that have permeated our state are far from inevitable.

There is an undeniable hope in knowing the work we do with children matters so very much. But this hope comes with a responsibility—the responsibility to rectify the imbalances that have plagued our public schools, the responsibility to learn from the successes of impactful schools, and the responsibility to reform how we do school in California at a time of unprecedented fiscal crisis.

Money from the federal stimulus bill can help our state move forward. Additional money may be available for specific initiatives through a competitive grant process, provided antiquated and restrictive laws do not hinder our eligibility. State leaders must take every step necessary to ensure California's students receive every dollar they are entitled to.

New provisions in the state's budget can help. While there is less money in the Governor's recently signed state budget than educators would like, there is more flexibility than ever before. Many categorical funds have been grouped together, allowing local leaders who best understand the needs of students, much-needed freedom to use available funds to meet those needs.

Strength of will can also help. As budgets become tighter and the weight of expectations become heavier, some may be tempted to back away from rigorous standards and rigorous assessments of teaching and learning. We must not do so. California must educate its way out of our current statewide doldrums, building a workforce and engaged citizenry fully equipped with the social, academic, and critical thinking skills necessary to succeed in an ever more complex, ever more competitive 21st century world.

Since 2003, California has done little more than dip its toes in the waters of education reform, enacting the type of modest change that will never yield more than modest results. It's time to do better. We must break the cycle of sowing middling changes and harvesting middling improvement, and get about the business of building the will to make good on the promise of public education for all California youth, and particularly the more than two hundred and fifty thousand low-income students and students of color who are continuously and systematically denied the fundamental civil right of a quality education.

ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST–WEST

The Education Trust promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels—pre-kindergarten through college. We work alongside parents, educators, and community and business leaders across the country in transforming schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. Lessons learned in these efforts, together with unflinching data analyses, shape our state and national policy agendas. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people—especially those who are black, Latino, American Indian, or from low-income families—to live on the margin of the American mainstream.

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