

August 15, 2006

## Achievement in California 2006: Small Gains, Growing Gaps

Today's results from the 2006 California's Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program reveal that the state has again made significant progress toward proficiency for all students. Scores are up at all grade levels, and students are performing at the highest levels since reporting began almost a decade ago.

But there is still a long way to go. Today's data show that too few students overall are reaching proficient levels in math and literacy despite higher average achievement—and in too many cases, the number of students testing below the basic level has risen. What's worse, the vast gaps in achievement between low-income students, students of color and their more advantaged peers show no sign of shrinking and are often growing larger.

### Overall Achievement On the Rise

Statewide, more students are reaching proficiency on California's Standards Test in 2006. That's good news. At all levels, more students are prepared for success in the world after school. The biggest gains are seen in the lower grades: in math, the percentage of students reaching proficiency in grades 2 through 5 grew by at least three points at each level.

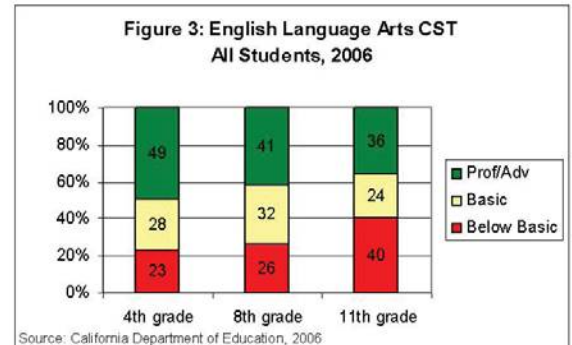
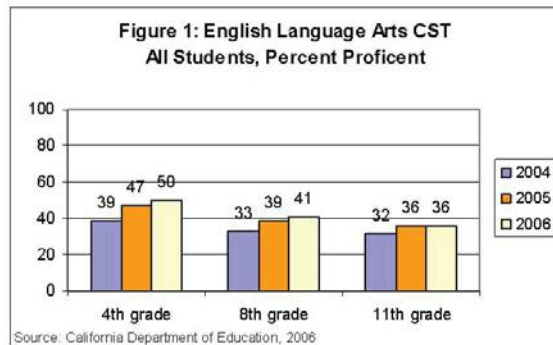
Some progress, though, is not enough. Almost one-third of 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> graders in California still test below or far below the basic level in math and English. And these averages mask huge achievement gaps separating some groups of students from their peers. To see a truer picture of what is going on at these grade levels, this report takes apart the averages and examines in more

detail the performance of students of different races and income groups.

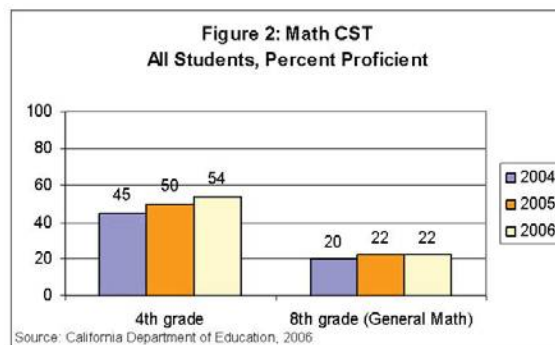
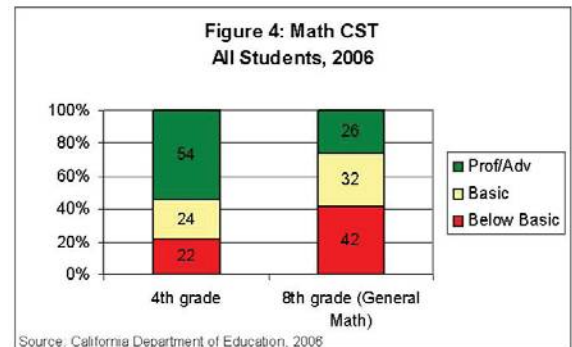
### *Gains of Recent Years Starting to Wane*

As a whole, California's students have made gains. But at most levels, progress is slower than in the past. At 4<sup>th</sup> grade, the percent of students proficient in English gained three points, to 50%—but last year's growth was eight points. Trends are similar in 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades. Eighth grade English proficiency levels rose six percentage points from 2004 to 2005, but this year they are only up by two percentage points. And 11<sup>th</sup> grade English proficiency levels, which rose four points last year, stayed exactly the same in 2006 (see Figure 1). Only two grade levels showed greater progress than last year (3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade) while there was no improvement at all for four grade levels (5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup>).

The vast gaps in achievement between low-income students, students of color and their more advantaged peers show no sign of shrinking and are often on the rise.



The story is the same in math: progress was smaller in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and stagnant in 8<sup>th</sup> (see Figure 2). Scores in Figure 2 for 8<sup>th</sup> grade math are from the General Math test, which is aligned with 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade standards. Our state’s goal, of course, is Algebra in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade for all. The good news is, of all the math subjects and grade levels tested, only Algebra I scores showed a larger gain this year than last.



## Huge Achievement Gaps

### Persist

California students as a whole may be making progress, but the achievement of Latino, African-American, low-income, and English learner students remains far behind their peers. A wide gulf still separates these groups of students from their peers. The data tell a clear story—Math and literacy achievement gaps show up early, and widen in the higher grades.

### Achievement Gaps Start Early

English Language Arts performance remains dismal for low-income students and students of color.

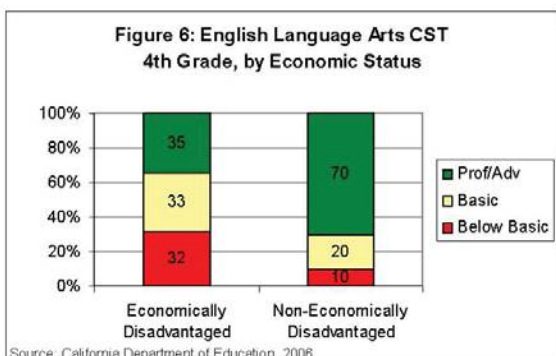
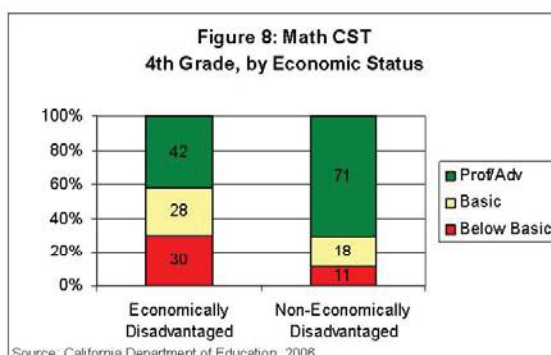
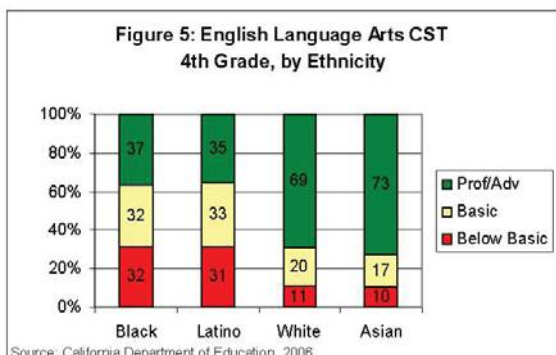
- More students of every subgroup are reaching proficiency, but gaps in achievement are not closing between economic or racial/ethnic subgroups.
- Affluent 4<sup>th</sup> graders are twice as likely as their low-income peers to reach proficiency in English (see Figure 6).
- Latino, African-American, and low-income 4<sup>th</sup> graders remain at below and far below basic levels in English Language Arts at three times the rate of White, Asian, and more affluent students. While more African-American 4<sup>th</sup> graders are reaching proficiency

Latino, African-American and low-income students remain at below and far below basic levels in English at three times the rate of White, Asian and more affluent students.

While proficiency levels are higher or the same at all grade levels, the percent of students testing below the basic level has also grown. In 11<sup>th</sup> grade English, 40% of students score below or far below basic, 3% more than last year (see Figure 3). General Math in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and 4<sup>th</sup> grade English also show small increases in students testing below basic (see Figures 3 and 4).

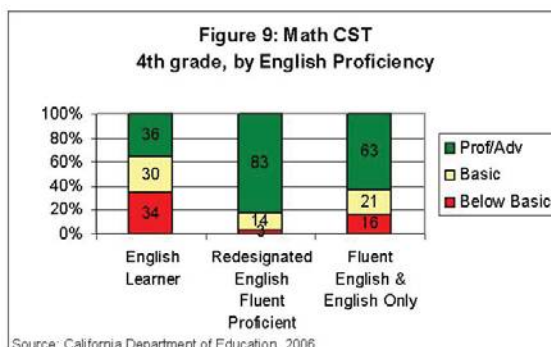
than in 2005, more are also testing below the basic level (see Figures 5 and 6).

Low-income students are almost three times as likely to score below the basic level as their more advantaged peers (see Figure 8).



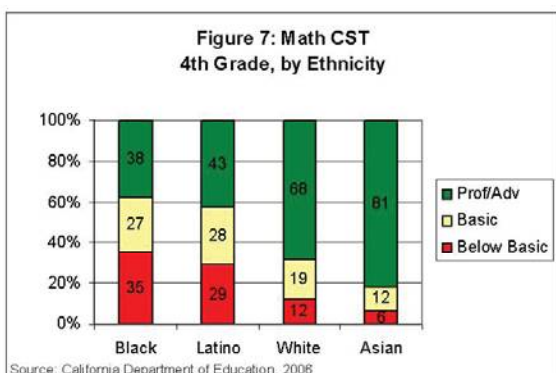
The most promising news of the day comes for our ELL students redesignated as English proficient.

- Gains in math for students redesignated as fluent English proficient are very encouraging: 83% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders reached proficiency—a six percentage point gain from 2005 (see Figure 9).



The gaps in math achievement are even larger.

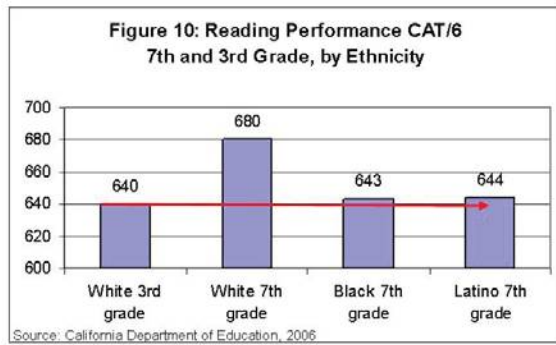
- Asian and White students are more than twice as likely to reach math proficiency than Latino and African-American 4<sup>th</sup> graders (see Figure 7).
- Among African-American students, 4% more are reaching proficiency than in 2005, but 5% fewer Latino 4<sup>th</sup> graders are meeting that goal (see Figure 7).



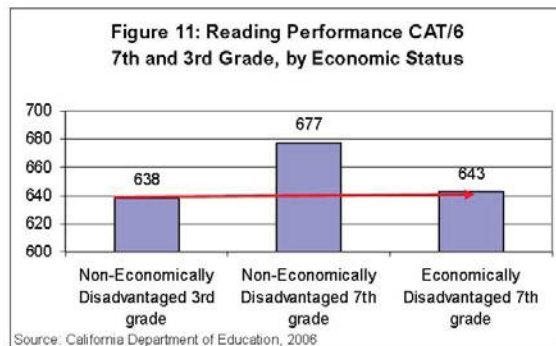
### Traction Stops at Middle and High school

Momentum in the early grades comes to a halt at the secondary level. Proficiency falls for all students, and achievement gaps widen between subgroups.

- Latino and African-American 7<sup>th</sup> graders are reading at the same level as White 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, according to scores on the 2006 CAT/6 (see Figure 10).

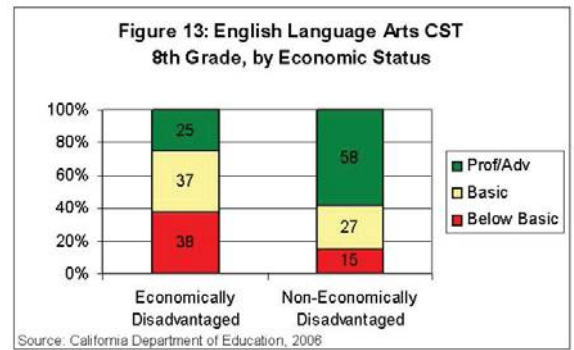
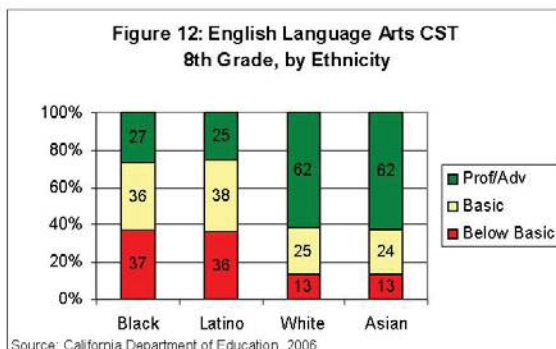


- Low-income 7<sup>th</sup> grade students read near the level of more affluent 3<sup>rd</sup> graders.
- In other words, by middle school the gap has grown to over four years worth of learning (see Figure 11). (The CAT/6 is no longer offered at the high school level.)

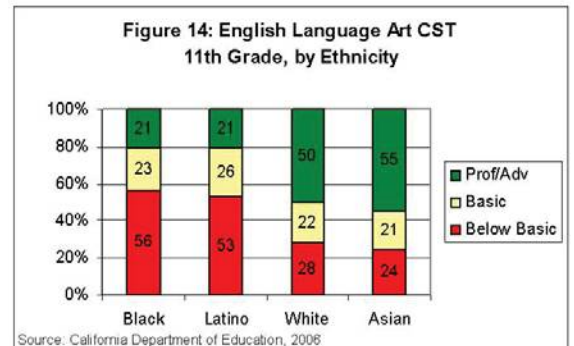


- While all groups of students show somewhat higher proficiency rates and fewer students testing below basic in 8<sup>th</sup> grade English, the greatest gains in proficiency were among White and Asian 8<sup>th</sup> graders. White, Asian, and wealthier students reach proficiency at more than twice the rate of their Latino, African-American, and low-income counterparts (see Figures 12 and 13).

In other words, by middle school the gap has grown to over four years worth of learning.

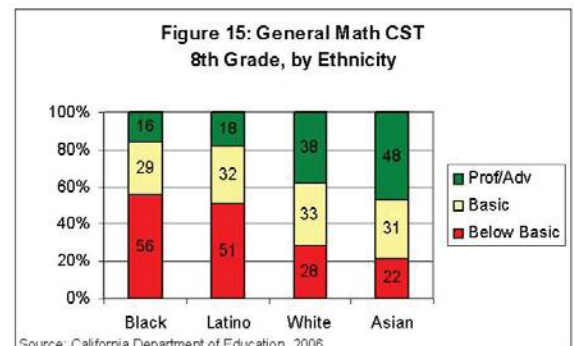


- By 11<sup>th</sup> grade, the proficiency levels are worse and the gaps grow even wider. Since 2005, below basic levels increased for every racial/ethnic subgroup—now more than half of African-American and Latino students score below or far below basic on 11<sup>th</sup> grade English (see Figure 14).

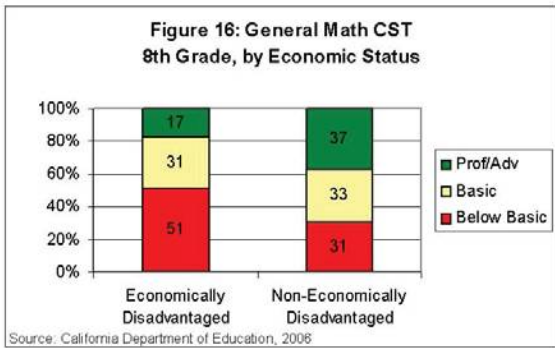


Math scores reflect similar patterns for middle and high schoolers: slow growth in achievement and persistent gaps between races and economic groups.

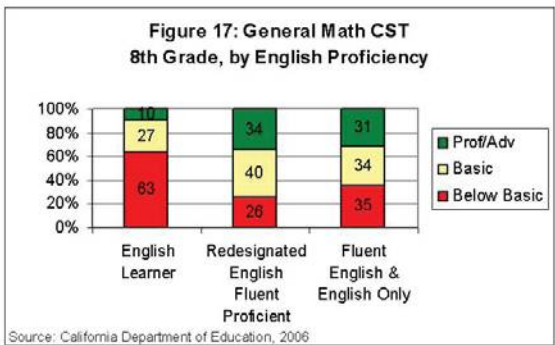
- On the 8<sup>th</sup> grade General Math test, which assesses 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade standards, only 16% of African-American, 18% of Latino, and 17% of low-income students are proficient—less than half the rates of their White, Asian, and non-low-income peers. More than half of these student groups score below the basic level (see Figures 15 and 16).





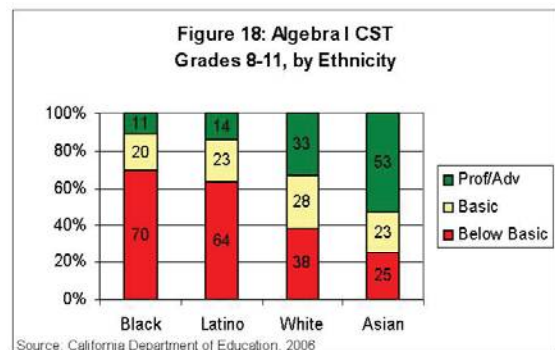


- English Language Learners are one-third as likely to reach proficiency in 8<sup>th</sup> grade math as their peers who are fluent in English (see Figure 17).

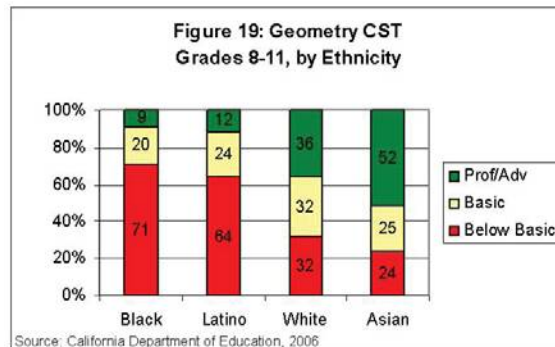


In high school, Algebra I and II and Geometry are key math courses to prepare students to enter college or the workforce. In fact, the courses taken in high school are more predictive of success in college than family income and race.

- Achievement gaps in these subject tests are staggering. White students are three times more likely, and Asian students are five times more likely to be proficient in Algebra than their African American peers (see Figure 18).



- In Geometry, African-American and Latino students are twice as likely to test below the basic level as White and Asian students (see Figure 19).



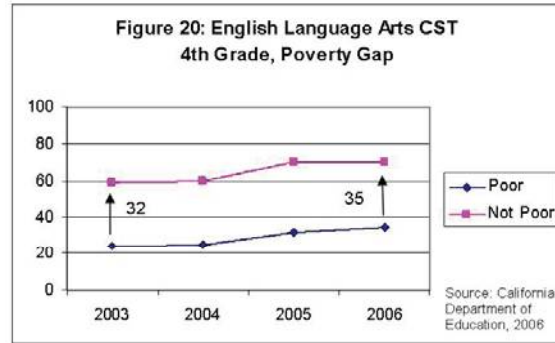
The practical skills and critical thinking taught in these high-level math courses are crucial to both admission and success in college as well as finding and holding a rewarding job. Unfortunately, many students still do not even have access to these courses, and those that do are far from reaching grade level.

### For The Most Part, Achievement Gaps Are Growing

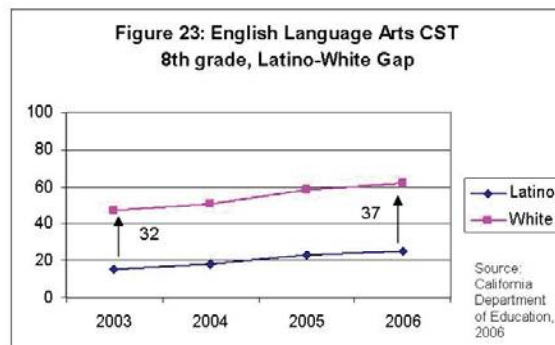
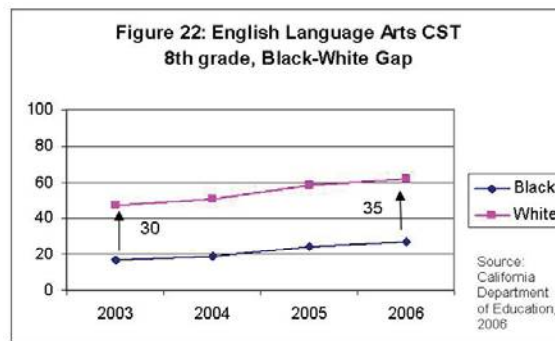
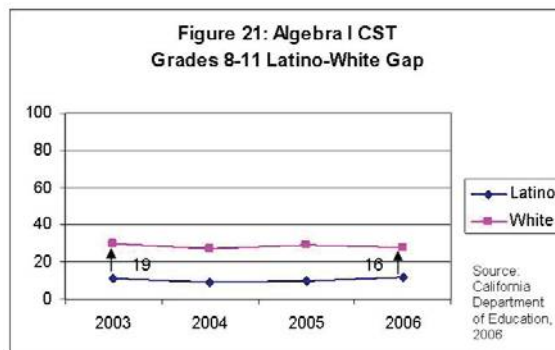
While all groups have improved over the past several years, achievement gaps between groups still loom large. Examining the percentage of each racial/ethnic subgroup performing at grade level, we can see that at most levels, gaps have remained the same or grown over the past four years. Overall, in grades 2 through 11, African-American and Latino students still trail their White counterparts by over 30 percentage points in English Language Arts. In math, the gaps have narrowed by one percentage point in that time—hardly a change to be proud of. The overall gaps between economic groups have actually grown in math and English since 2003, (the year the California standards and assessments were completely aligned.)

Taking a closer look at specific grade levels is telling. In 4<sup>th</sup> grade English, the gap between African-American and White students has held steady at 32 percentage points since 2003, but the gap between Latino and White students has grown from 32 to 34 points. The gap between low-income 4<sup>th</sup> graders and their more advan-

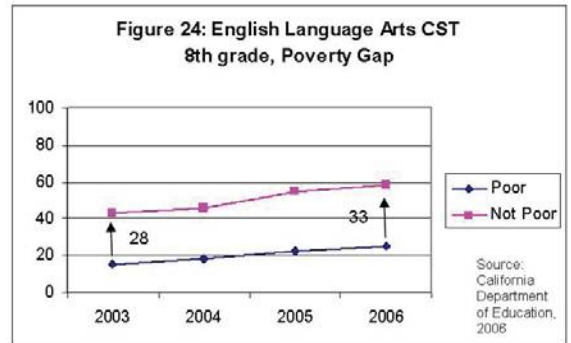
tagged peers has risen by three points since 2003 (see Figure 20).



- In 8<sup>th</sup> grade English, all gaps have grown since 2003 by five percentage points (see Figures 21, 22, and 23).



In 8<sup>th</sup> grade General Math, the gaps between African-American, Latino, and White students has closed slightly. Achievement gaps between racial/ethnic groups in Algebra I have also narrowed (see Figure 24), but partially due to the falling performance of White students in 2006. The declining performance of any group is never considered good news. It is, in fact, the opposite of what academic goals should be: raising overall achievement for every group while accelerating the performance of those further behind.



**Is this inevitable?**

Some believe that persistent achievement gaps suggest that equal educational achievement is an impossible goal, that low-income children and children of color simply can't meet California's high standards. This belief is pervasive, destructive, and demonstrably untrue. And high-performing, high-poverty, high-minority schools across the state debunk this myth daily at every grade level. Take, for example:

- Ralph Bunche Elementary in Compton Unified. Ralph Bunche is 98% African-American and Latino and 94% low-income. A full 93% of Bunche's Latino 4<sup>th</sup> grades are proficient or above, compared to less than half of their Latino peers in the district and state (see Figure 25).

## Secrets of Success

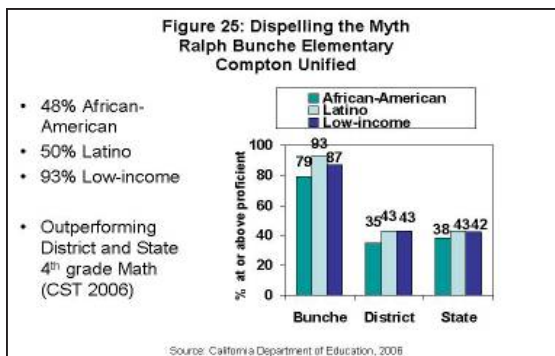
Ralph Bunche, Mathson Middle, and Preuss are just a few examples of schools across the state are performing at the highest levels. Their students, teachers, and administrators are rising to the challenge of high expectations and defying the myth that pervasive low achievement is inevitable. What do we know about the places that are improving results?

***They know that good teaching matters more than anything else.***

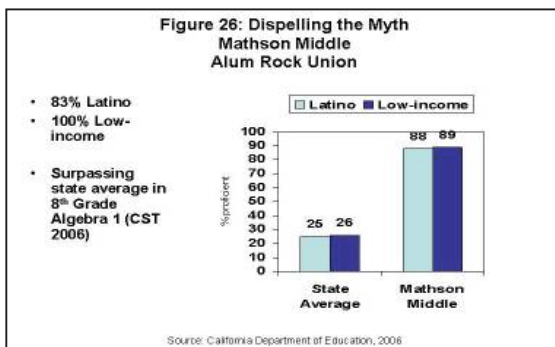
High quality teachers are the single most important factor in student success—present and future. Students assigned to high-performing teachers dramatically outperform those assigned to low-performing teachers.<sup>1</sup> But too many students, particularly Latino, African-American, and low-income students, lack this vital resource. In California, students at high-minority schools are four times as likely to have an under-prepared math or science teacher as those at the lowest minority schools.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, 53% of intern teachers work in schools that are predominantly minority while only 3% work in schools serving the lowest proportion of minority students.<sup>3</sup> Yet, even with the legislative pressures of No Child Left Behind, California currently lacks a cohesive plan to address equity in teacher talent.

Achievement gaps between racial/ethnic groups in Algebra I have also narrowed, but partially due to the falling performance of White students in 2006.

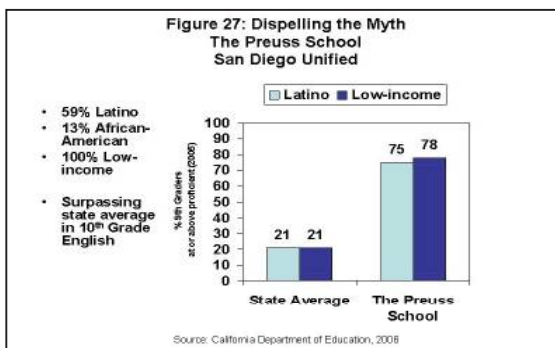
If we have learned anything from high-performing schools, it's that they provide teachers supports they need to get better, and they ensure kids most dependent on their teachers for learning are assigned the teachers most effective at accelerating student achievement.



- Or take Mathson Middle in Alum Rock Union where 100% of the students are low-income and 83% are Latino. At Mathson, a full 89% of its Latino students are proficient in Algebra compared to only about 26% of Latino students statewide (see Figure 26).



- And at the high school level, like Preuss School in San Diego, where 100% of the students are low-income, a full 78% of Preuss' low-income students are proficient in English Language Arts compared to only about 1 in 5 low income students statewide (see Figure 27).



These schools prove that myths suggesting students of color and low-income can't achieve at the highest levels are dead wrong. The goal, of course, must be to make these schools the rule rather than the exception.

***They provide all students with challenging curriculum aligned with standards.***

High performing schools expect all their students to meet high standards, and they ensure that every child has access to a rigorous curriculum that adheres to those standards. In too many schools, some students are taught rich and challenging material while others languish in low-level classes that fail to prepare them for success in college and the workforce. Whether or not they require a college degree, good jobs with promising futures require at least Algebra II or Geometry and rigorous, on-grade-level English skills.<sup>4</sup> And good schools provide such challenging, standards-based curriculum to all students.

***They offer extra instruction when students need it.***

All students are capable of achieving at high levels, but some need extra support to get there. All means all, but not necessarily in the same way and not within the same time period. Schools that succeed in closing achievement gaps focus more time, attention, and resources on those students who need the most help. And when those resources are dedicated, the gains are clear.

**A First Step: Equitable Funding**

Today in California, schools that educate the highest proportions of low-income and minority children do so with significantly fewer dollars per pupil than schools serving the fewest poor and minority students. It is not only a mat-

ter of rich districts versus poor ones: within districts, there are substantial spending gaps between schools, as documented in the Education Trust—West report “California’s Hidden Teacher Spending Gap” (available online at [www.edtrustwest.org](http://www.edtrustwest.org)). These gaps are not only in school upkeep or materials—spending on teachers, the most vital resource for student achievement, is vastly unequal. As districts begin to tell the truth about school level expenditures in compliance with SB 687<sup>1</sup>, there will be a new public awareness of how and where education dollars are spent, and hopefully change in district budgeting practices. The equitable distribution of resources is key to closing the California’s pervasive achievement gaps.

**Looking Forward**

Across the state, schools are exploding the myth that achievement gaps are inevitable. At individual sites, Latino, African American, and low-income students are reaching proficiency well above state averages, proving that it can be done. The task of the state as a whole is to live up to the examples set by those outstanding schools and help all students to achieve high standards.

The progress shown in the data released today is a good sign, but the demands of families, students, and today’s economy are too urgent for modest gains. California must work harder to close the gaps in curriculum, in resources, and in opportunities that plague our schools—then will we see gaps in achievement begin to close.

---

<sup>1</sup> Authored by Senator Joe Simitian in response to the Education Trust—West’s *Hidden Gap* series, SB 687 requires districts to report school level expenditures by source, including average spending on teachers.

---

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> US Dep of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement, *Answers in the Tool Box*, 1999, <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/Toolbox/toolbox.html>

<sup>2</sup> Heather Jordan, Robert Mendro, and Dash Weerasinghe, *The Effects of Teachers on Longitudinal Student Achievement*, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Esch, C. E., Chang-Ross, C. M., et al. *The status of the teaching profession*. The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

The Education Trust—West is the West Coast presence of the national policy organization the Education Trust. We work for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels, kindergarten through college. While we know that all schools and colleges could better serve their students, we concentrate on the institutions most often left behind—those serving low-income, Latino, African American, or 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. For more information please visit our website at [www.edtrustwest.org](http://www.edtrustwest.org).