



August 14, 2008

Achievement in California 2008: Fading Gains, Growing Gaps

The results released today by the California Department of Education from California's 2008 Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program reveal that educators across the state have once again made progress in improving student performance and moving students closer to proficiency. Performance levels, and the improvements in knowledge and skill they represent, have increased across all grades, and more students are performing on grade level since the California Standards Tests (CSTs) were fully aligned to content standards six years ago.

The good news ends there.

The 2008 STAR results demonstrate that far too many of California's young people struggle to reach grade level expectations in Math and Language Arts, and disturbingly, the percentage of students that still have not been taught to even the basic levels remains high. Growing too, are the vast and appalling gaps between low-income, Latino and African-American students, and their White, Asian and more affluent peers.

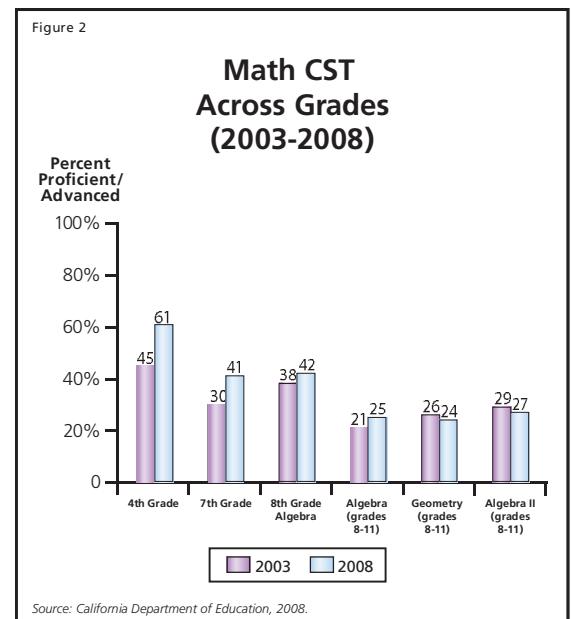
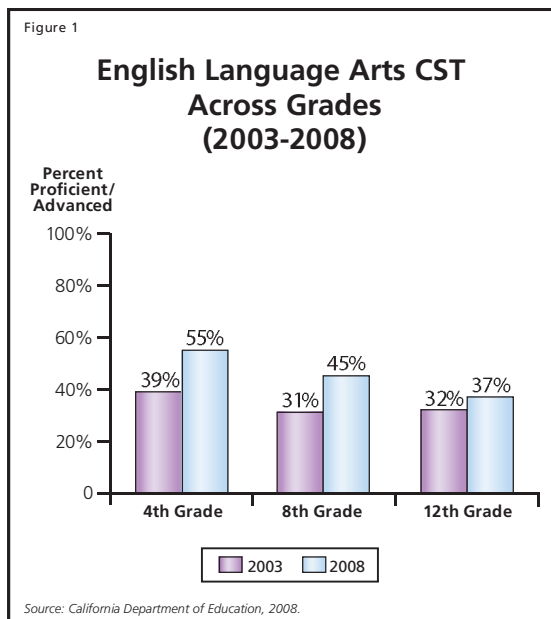
Still, some progress is good progress. At the same time, however, the need to acknowledge what is working must not mask the truth about what is not. And the truth is, California's record of growth though continuous, is simply not enough. Not nearly enough.

OVERALL ACHIEVEMENT INCHING FORWARD

Across the state, more students reached proficiency in the English Language Arts (ELA) portion of the CSTs in 2008 than in previous years, especially in California's elementary schools. Unfortunately, both the pace of improvement, and the overall achievement level itself declines as students progress through the school system. 8th grade performance is lower than 4th grade performance, and 11th grade performance is lower still. (Figure 1)

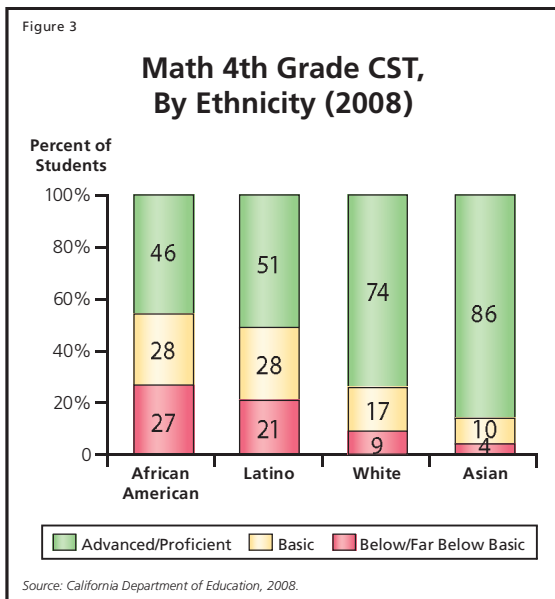
Student achievement in mathematics mirrors these trends. Students demonstrate greater improvement and higher achievement in the early grades, but by secondary school progress comes to a halt. The results are most especially dramatic in Geometry and Algebra II, the only assessed areas where student performance declined. (Figure 2)

Clearly, these data and the patterns they reveal demand closer attention. Analyzing school and student performance in broad strokes obscures important trends in academic progress, and academic stagnation. To see a truer picture of what is really happening to California's young people, we examine in detail the performance of students of different ethnic groups, income levels, and English proficiency status, and across California's elementary and secondary grade levels.



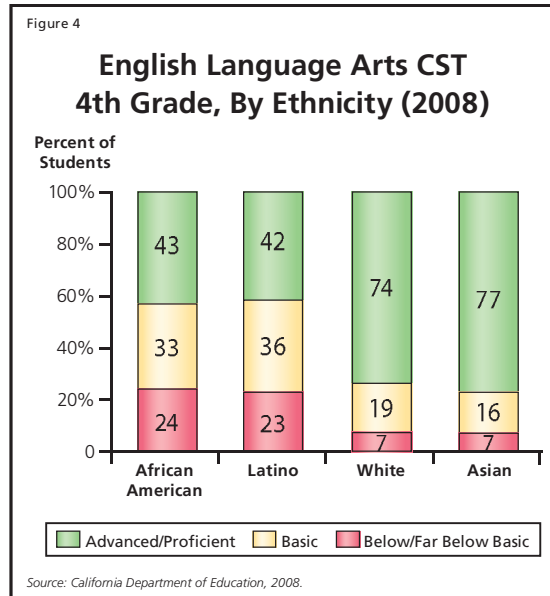
ELEMENTARY STUDENTS GAIN GROUND

California's fourth graders demonstrated Math proficiency gains of five percentage points between 2007 and 2008. Despite this moderate improvement, large gaps in achievement persistent.

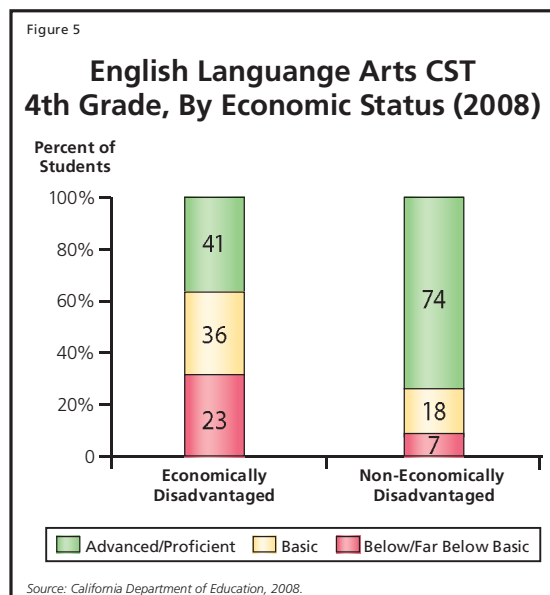


- Less than half of Latino and African-American students perform at grade level, compared to more than 75% of White and Asian students. (Figure 3)
- Latino and African-American students are over three times more likely to perform at the Below and Far Below Basic levels than their White and Asian counterparts. (Figure 3)

These gaps are even more pronounced in English.



- Slightly more than forty percent of Latino and African-American students reach grade level in English, compared to more than 75% of California's White and Asian 4th graders. (Figure 4)
- Low-income 4th graders perform at the Below and Far Below Basic levels at over three times the rate of their more affluent peers. (Figure 5)



ARE ACHIEVEMENT GAPS CLOSING IN MATH? BARELY.

In Math, the disparities in achievement between African-American and Latino students, and their White peers have narrowed by five percentage points over the last six years. (Figures 6 and 7)

Similarly, the gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers narrowed by four percentage points during the same time period. (Figure 8)

Despite moderate improvement, large gaps in achievement persist.

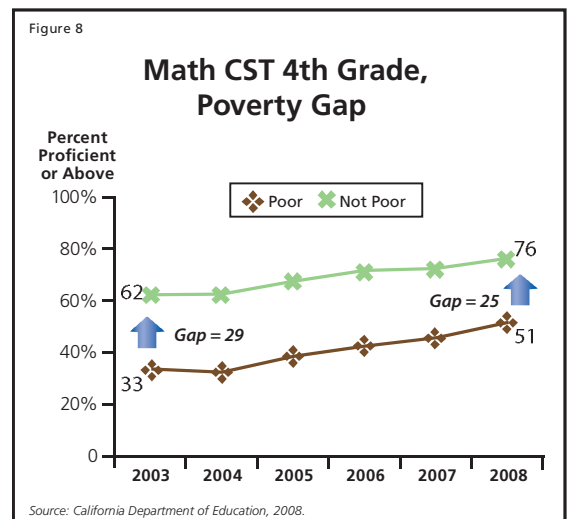
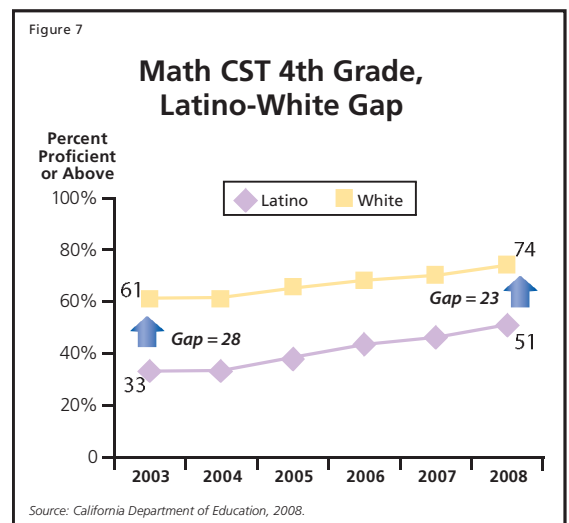
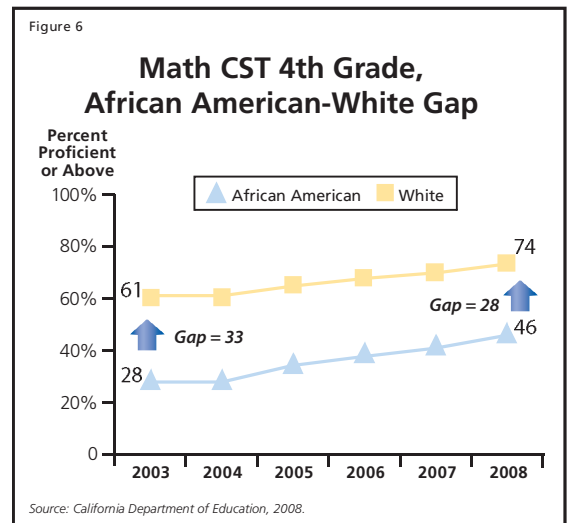
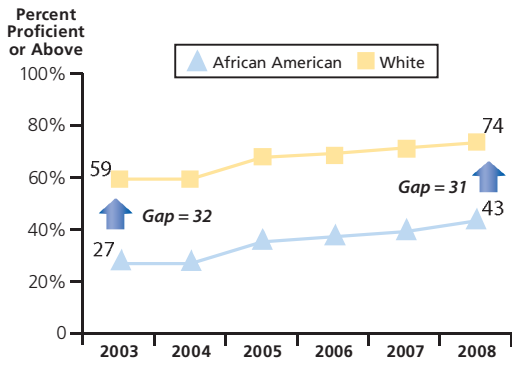


Figure 9

English Language Arts CST 4th Grade, African American-White Gap



Source: California Department of Education, 2008.

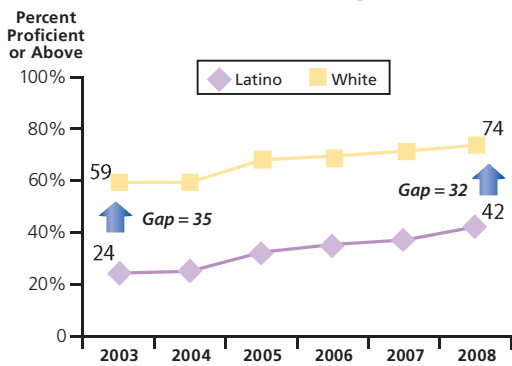
ARE ACHIEVEMENT GAPS CLOSING IN ENGLISH? BARELY.

In English-Language Arts, the gaps are narrowing at an even slower rate. The achievement gaps between African American and White students closed by one point (Figure 9); by three points between Latino and White students (Figure 10); and by two points between low-income students and their more affluent peers. (Figure 11)

Since 2003, the percentage of 4th graders reaching proficient and above in Math and English has improved more than any other grade or content area. Yet, the gaps in achievement between low-income students and students of color, and their more advantaged peers have closed at an appallingly slow rate. At best, these disparities narrow at a rate of slightly less than one point per year.

Figure 10

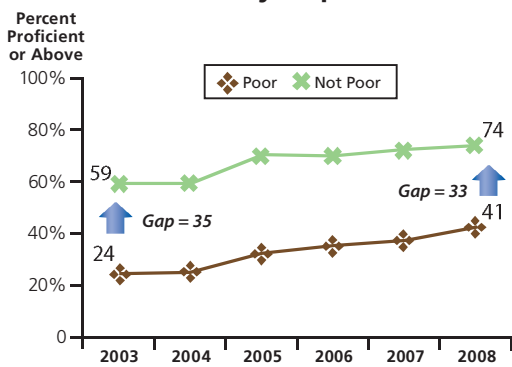
English Language Arts CST 4th Grade, Latino-White Gap



Source: California Department of Education, 2008.

Figure 11

English Language Arts CST 4th Grade, Poverty Gap

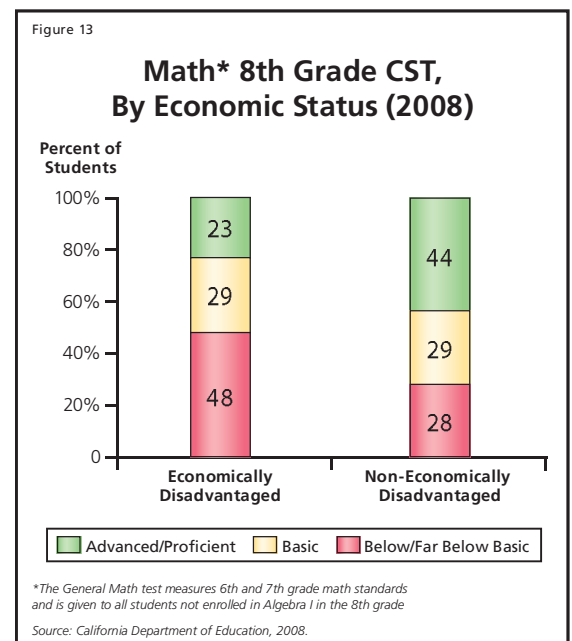
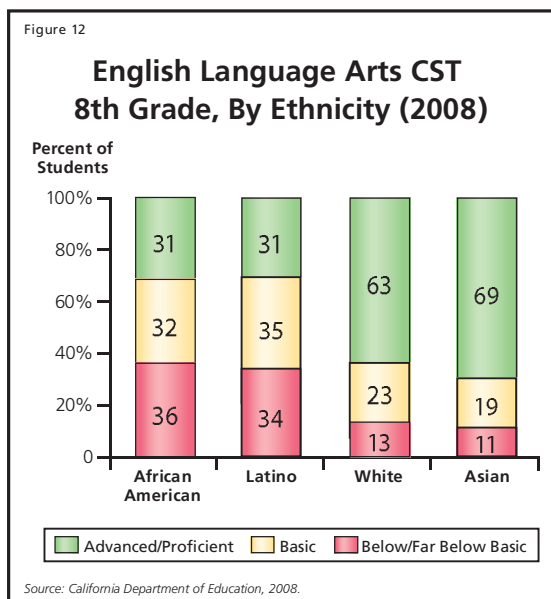


Source: California Department of Education, 2008.

GAINS STAGNANT AT MIDDLE SCHOOL

In contrast to the elementary grades, 8th grade students demonstrated substantially lower rates of proficiency in both Math and English. At the same time, the gaps in achievement persist, and in some cases, actually widen.

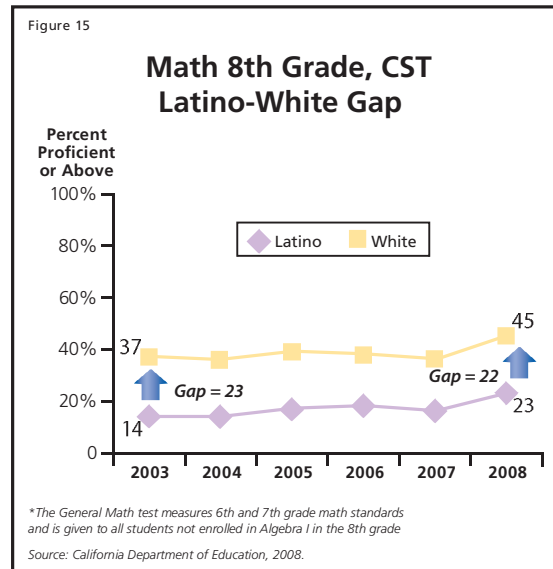
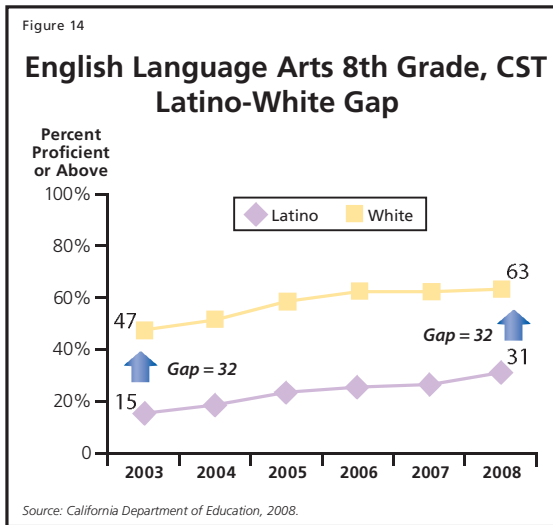
- In English and in General Math (an 8th grade assessment that covers 6th and 7th grade standards and is given to students not enrolled in Algebra I), Latino and African-American and low-income students reach proficiency at less than half the rate of their White, Asian, and more affluent peers. (Figures 12 and 13)



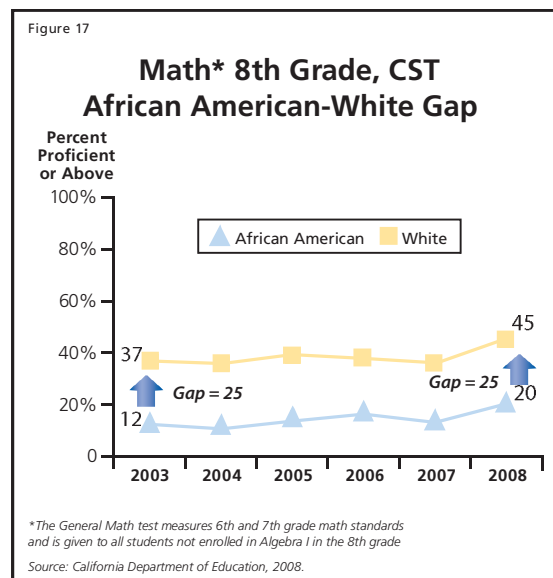
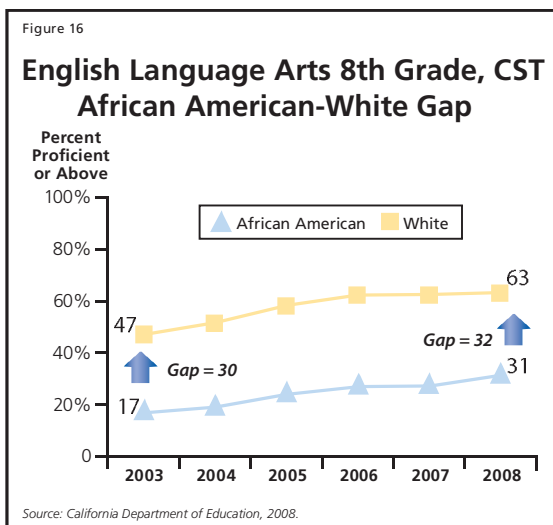
MIDDLE SCHOOL GAPS REMAIN

Examining the achievement trends over time, the news becomes worse still. The gap closing seen in 4th grade, modest though it was, has slowed and mostly stopped by 8th grade. In some instances, achievement gaps have actually begun to grow larger and more severe.

- Gaps between Latino and White students remained stagnant in 8th grade English and General Math. (Figures 14 and 15)

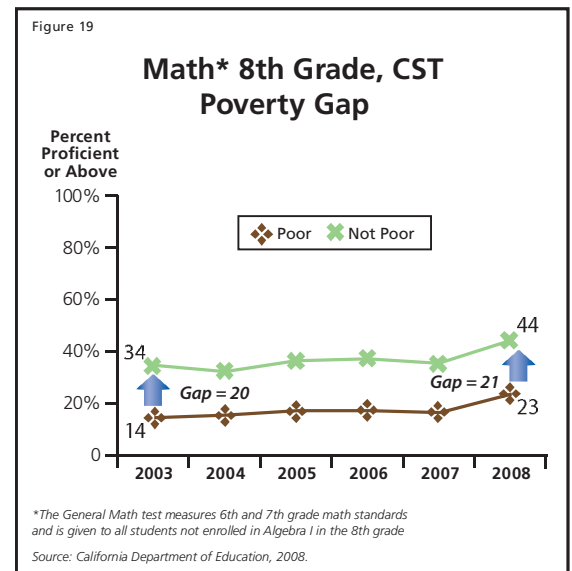
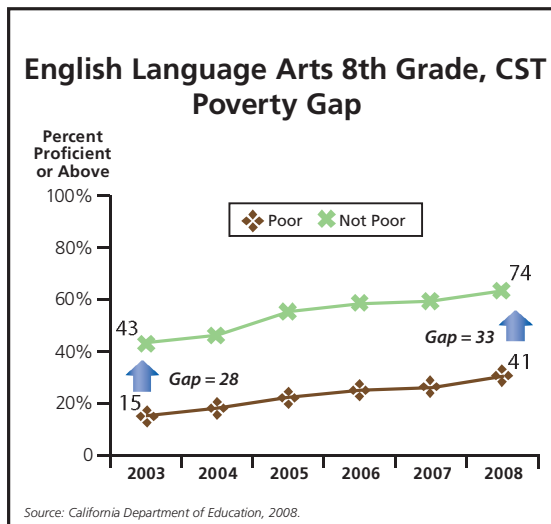


- Gaps between African-American and White students grew by two points in English, while remaining stagnant in General Math. (Figures 16 and 17)



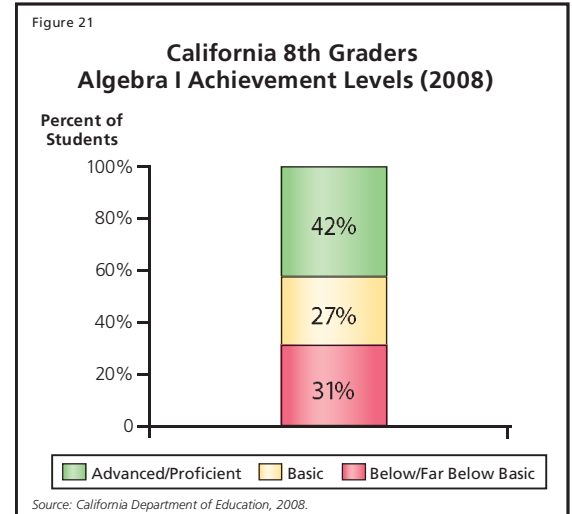
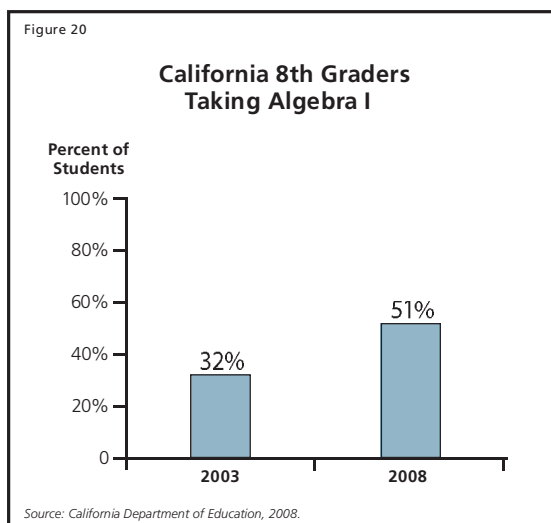
POVERTY GAPS GROWING IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

- Gaps between low-income students and their more affluent peers grew by five percentage points in English and 1 point in General Math. (Figures 18 and 19)

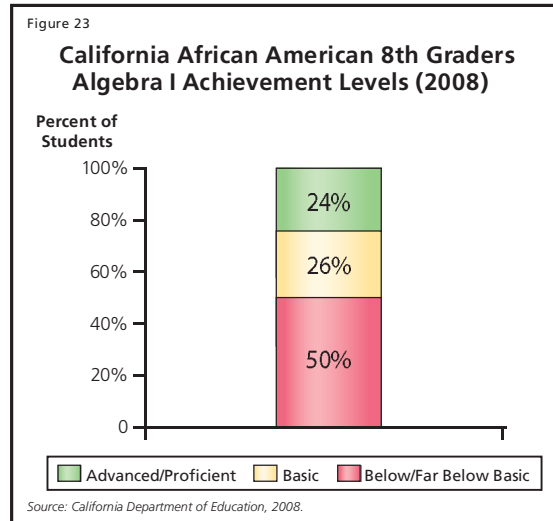
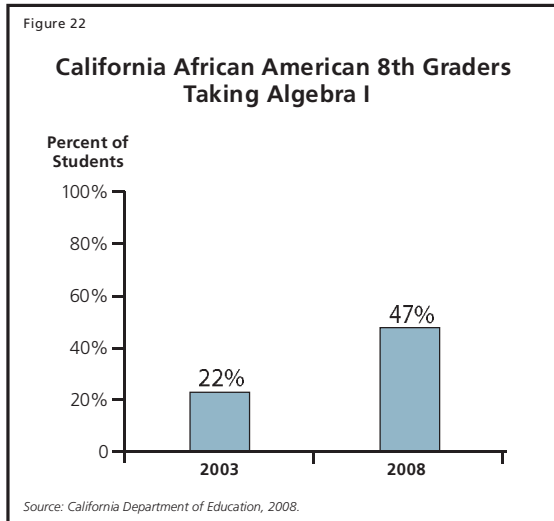


EIGHTH GRADERS TAKING ALGEBRA I

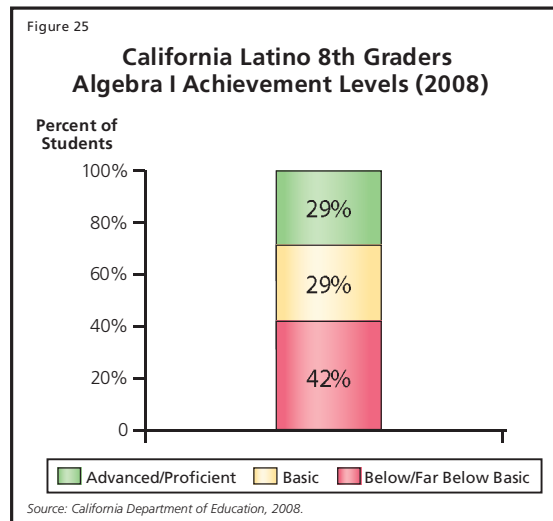
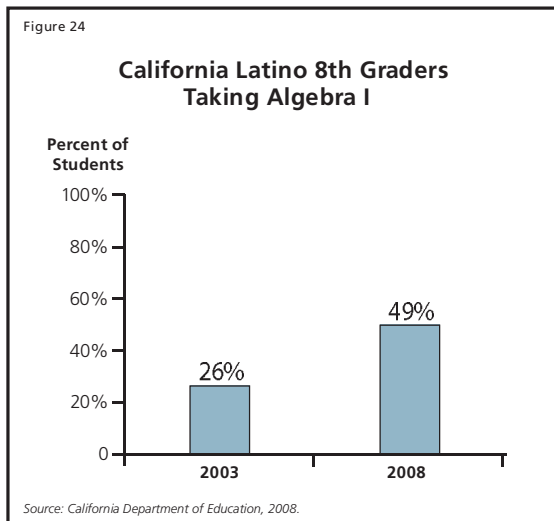
Over the last six years, the percentages of students taking Algebra in the 8th grade has grown substantially, up from about a third in 2003 to more than half in 2008. This year, of those 8th graders taking Algebra I, a full 42% are performing at proficient or above. (Figures 20 and 21)



ALGEBRA I (CONTINUED)

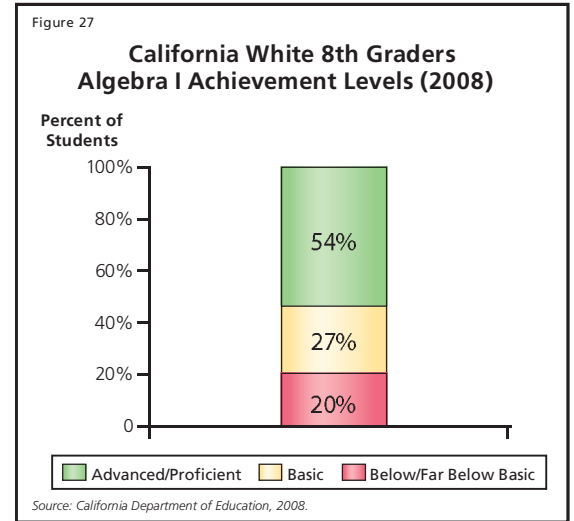
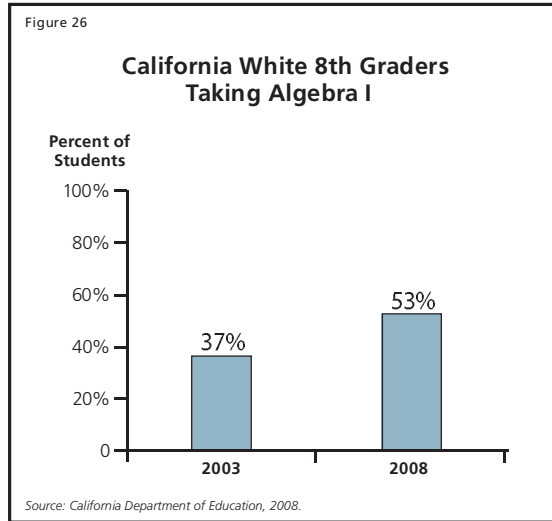


Though 47% of African-American 8th graders are enrolled in Algebra, fewer than one in four are proficient. Similar patterns hold true for Latino 8th graders—nearly half of them are enrolled in Algebra, but only about one-third are mastering Algebra skills. (Figures 22 and 23)

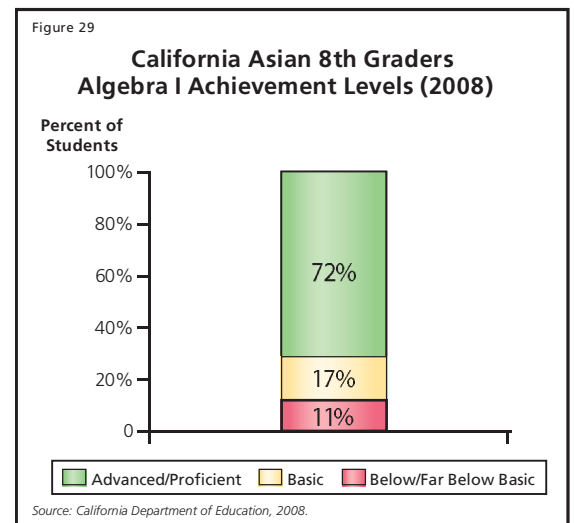
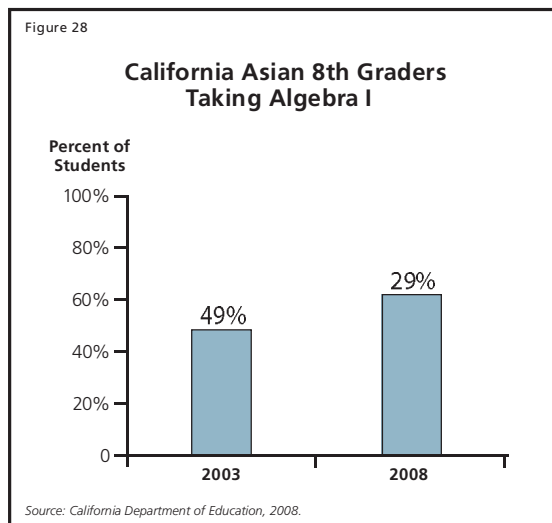


Among the students who take Algebra I in 8th grade, Latino and African-American students are Below and Far Below Basic levels at more than twice the rate of their White and Asian counterparts. (Figures 23, 25, 27 and 29)

ALGEBRA I (CONTINUED)



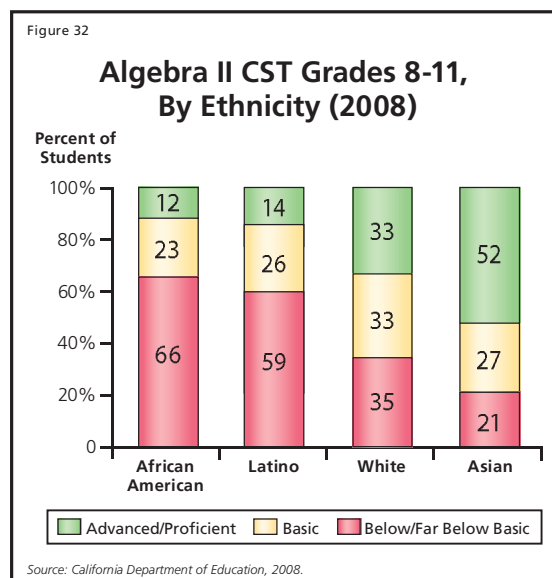
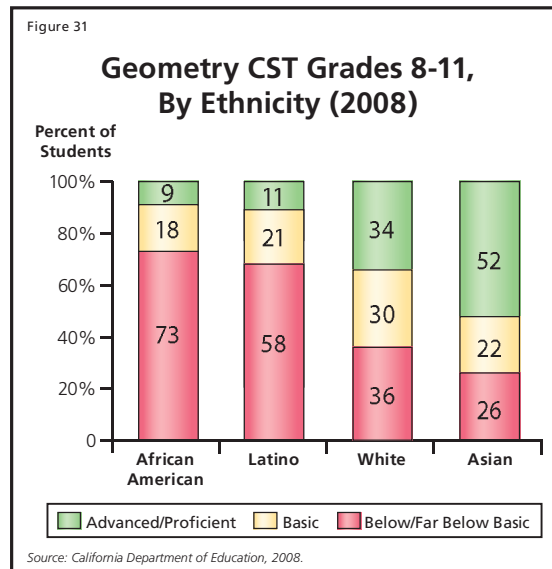
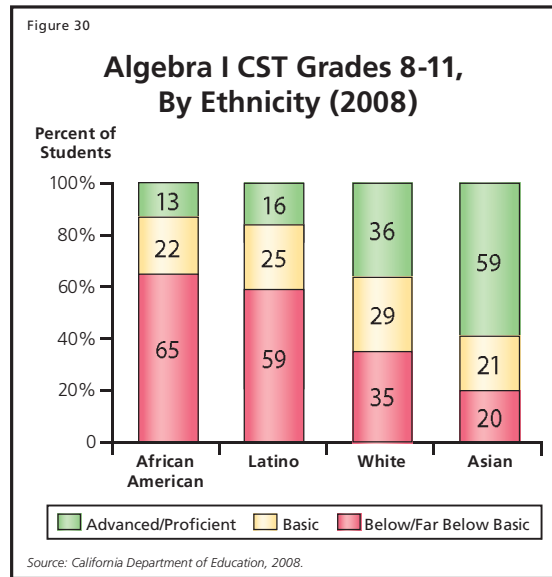
By contrast, over half of California's White 8th graders are enrolled in Algebra, and 54% are proficient. Similarly, about two-third's of our Asian 8th graders are taking Algebra, and nearly three-fourths reach proficiency. (Figures 26 through 29)



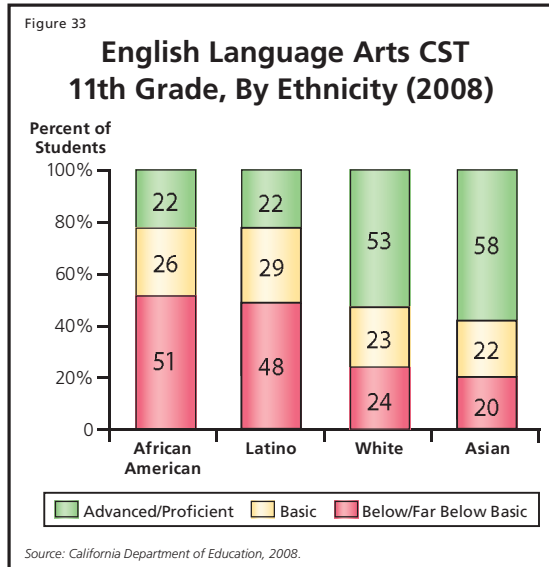
BY HIGH SCHOOL, EVERYTHING IS WORSE

By the time most of California's students are in high school, fewer are proficient, and the gaps grow even wider.

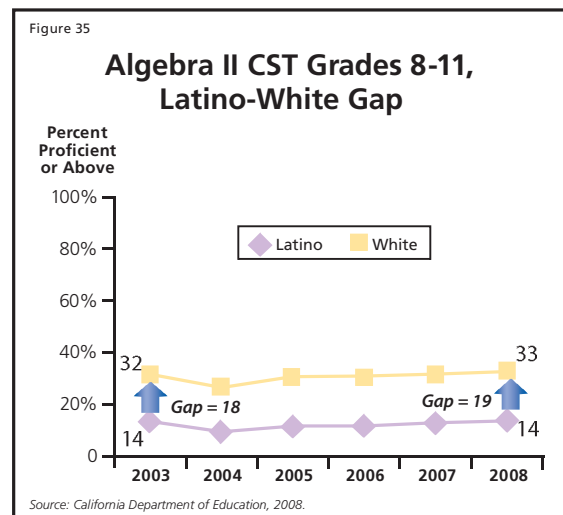
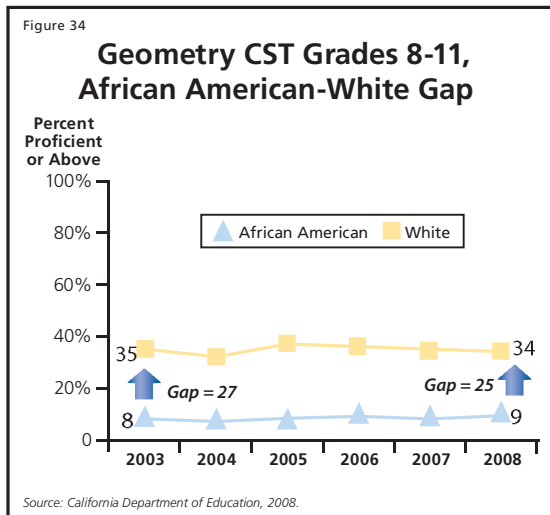
- In Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II, Latino and African-American students attain proficiency at less than half the rate of White and Asian students. Across these courses, more than two-thirds of Latino and African-American students have not been taught to even the basic level. (Figures 30 through 32)



HIGH SCHOOL (CONTINUED)



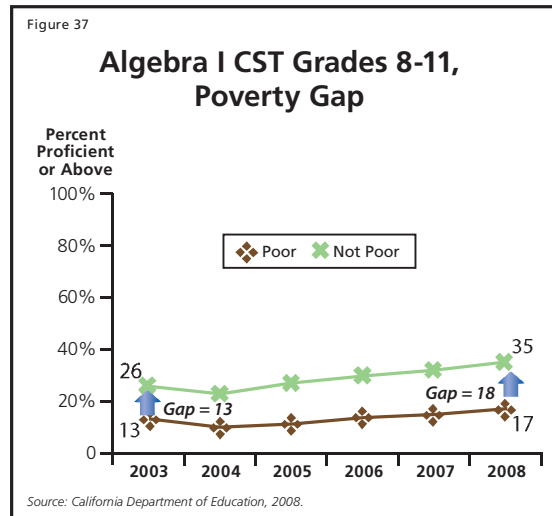
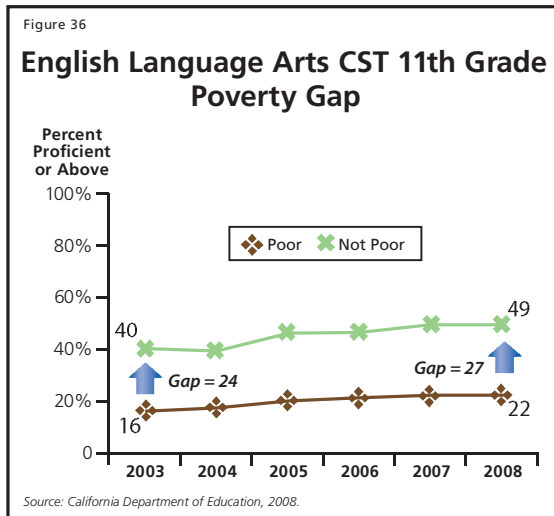
In 11th grade English, barely 1 in 5 Latino and African-American students are proficient – roughly the same percentage of White and Asian students who perform at the Below and Far Below Basic levels. (Figure 33)



When examined over the last six years, these data paint a sobering picture. Although more students of all groups are enrolled in Geometry and Algebra II, achievement gaps are barely closing. (Figure 34 and 35)

HIGH SCHOOL (CONTINUED)

In 11th grade English and Algebra I (grades 8-11), the gaps have actually grown larger, especially for students living in poverty.

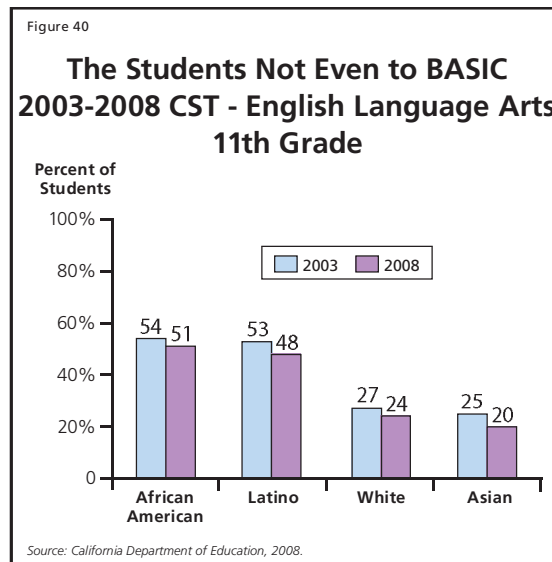
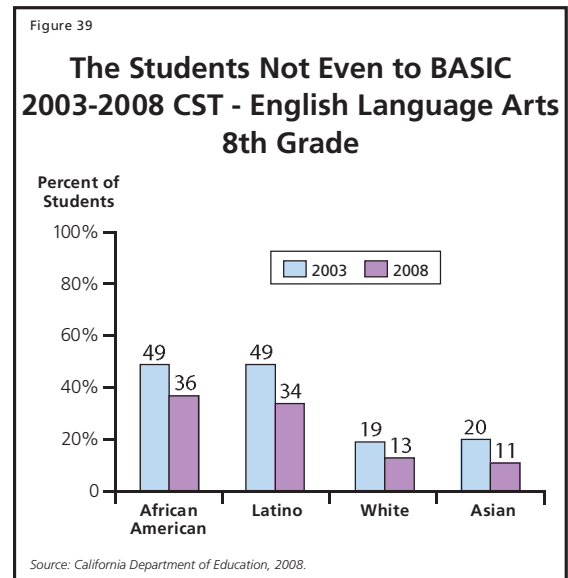
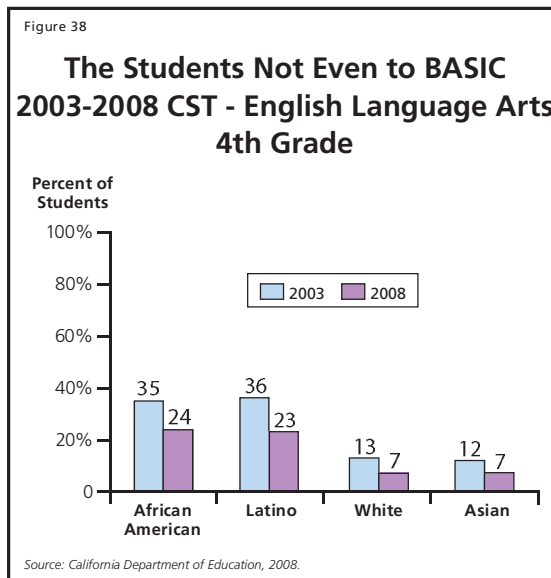


As we examine student achievement trends over time, a dismal picture emerges. The longer students remain in school, the lower their levels of achievement. Indeed, with time, the narrowing of achievement gaps between groups slows in the elementary grades, stops in middle school, and then begins to widen again in high school.

INSUFFICIENT GROWTH OUT OF LOWEST LEVELS

To gain the most accurate possible picture of student achievement, we look not only at progress into proficiency and beyond, we also examine student growth out of the Below and Far Below Basic levels. Far too often, we focus attention on the movement into proficiency as the only indicator of student growth and overall progress. This myopic view does a disservice to the students furthest behind, students whose profound gaps in skill and knowledge require the most focused of our efforts, as well as the most effective teachers and schools.

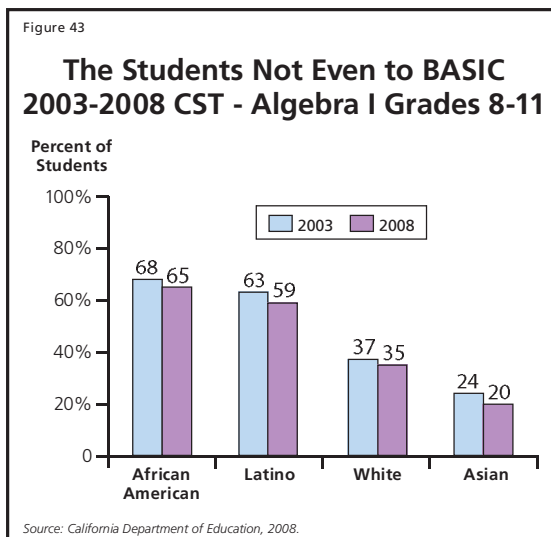
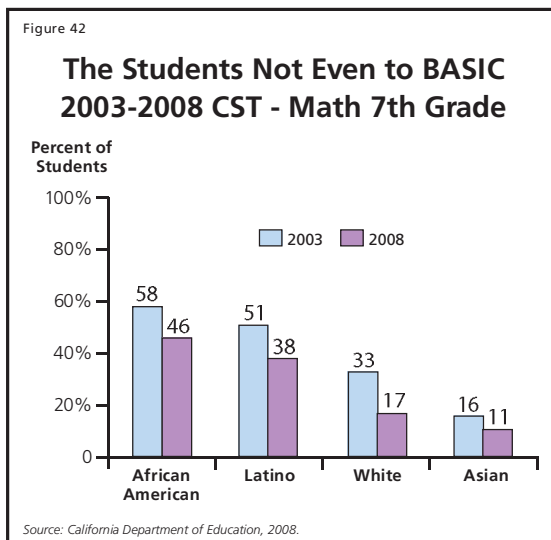
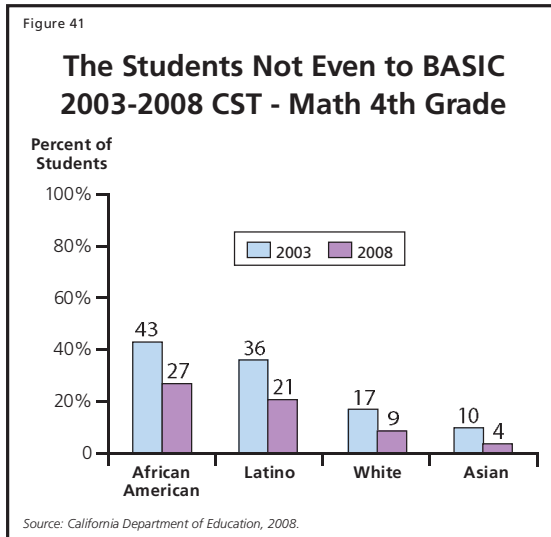
In many ways, the trends in student performance at the Below and Far Below Basic levels mirror growth patterns at the Proficient and Advanced levels. In 4th, 8th, and 11th grade English, Latino and African-American students perform at the Below and Far Below Basic levels at more than twice the rate of their White and Asian counterparts. (Figures 38 through 40)



INSUFFICIENT GROWTH OUT OF LOWEST LEVELS (CONTINUED)

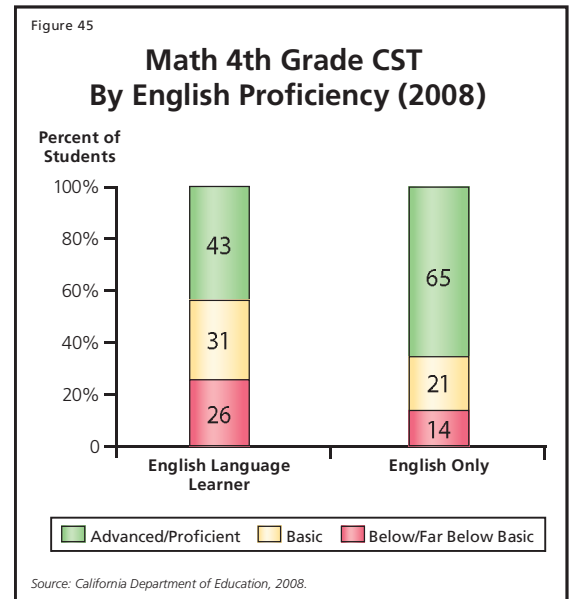
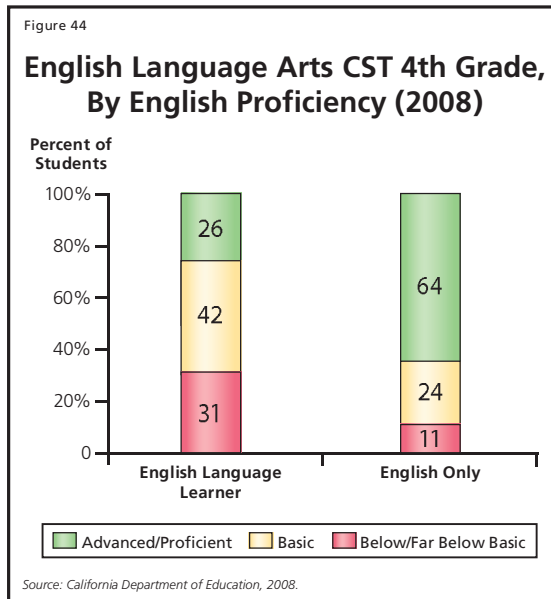
Moreover, the rate of movement out of Below and Far Below Basic levels and into the Basic level continues to be greatest during elementary school, slowing during middle school, and nearly stopping altogether by high school.

This trend holds true in elementary Math and Algebra I (8-11) as well – weaker performance at the secondary level. (Figures 41 through 43)

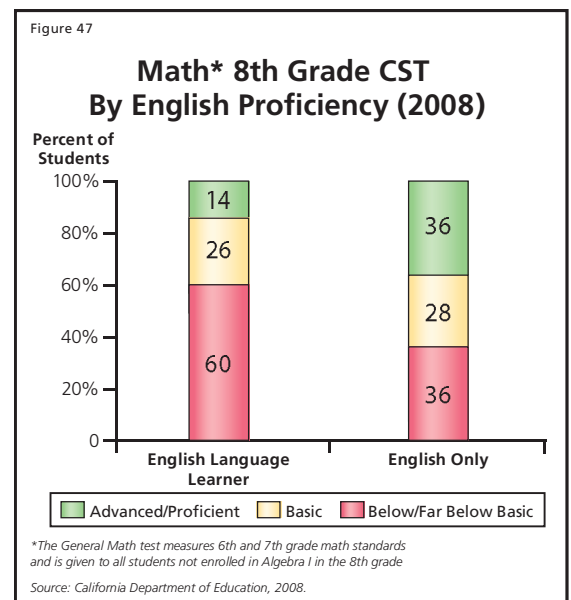
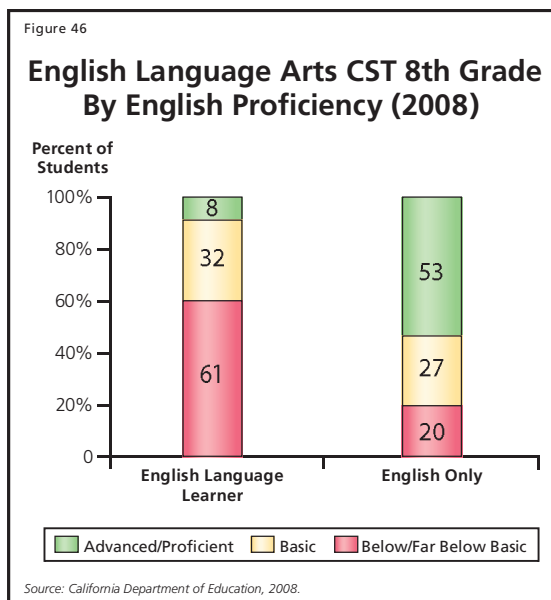


ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS LAG FAR BEHIND

English Language Learners (ELLs) continue to be taught to, and perform at, low rates. The achievement gaps between ELLs and English Only (EO) students are staggering. These gaps are clearly apparent by 4th grade. (Figures 44 and 45)



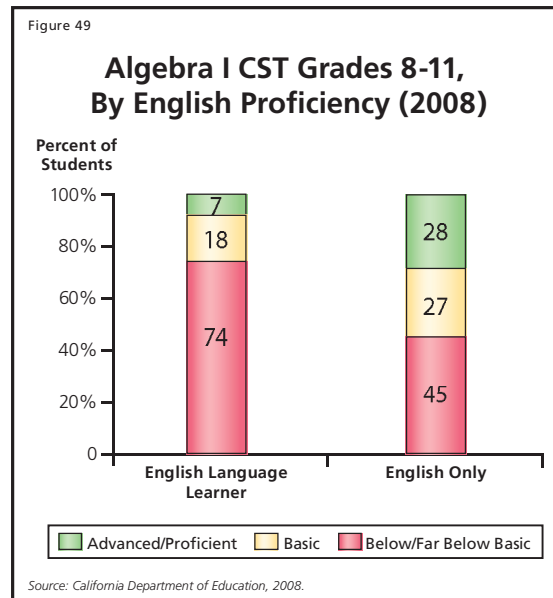
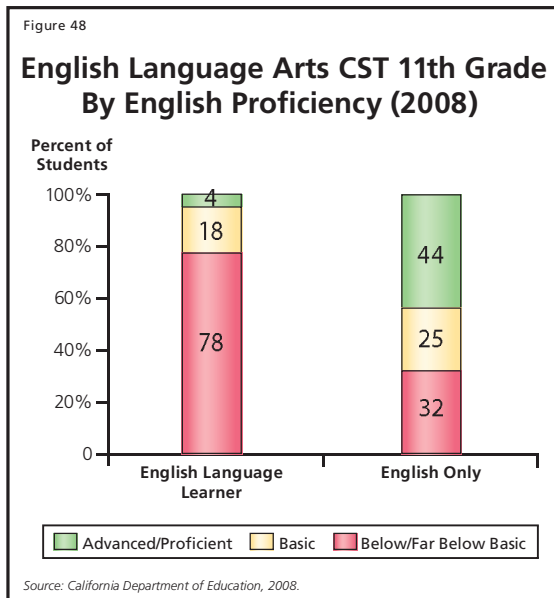
By 8th grade, students who are still classified as ELLs demonstrate some of the lowest performance of any student group. In English, EO students meet grade level expectations at more than five times the rate of ELLs. (Figure 46) Additionally, ELLs perform at the Below and Far Below Basic levels at three times the rate of EOs. In General Math, ELLs reach proficiency at half the rate of their EO counterparts, but perform at the Below and Far Below Basic levels at nearly twice the rate. (Figure 47)



ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (CONTINUED)

For ELLs in the 11th grade, the picture is bleak.

In 11th grade English, a whopping 78% of ELLs perform at the Below and Far Below Basic levels. In Algebra I (8-11), 74% of ELLs have not been taught to even the Basic level. (Figures 48 and 49)



LOOKING AHEAD, MOVING FORWARD

Step I: Know what we don't now know.

The data released by the California Department of Education today, though abundant, are not yet complete. They represent important snapshots of student performance statewide. They don't however, allow us to track student progress over time or follow the progress of any cohort. They don't tell us much about student or school growth.

In today's report, data was released in new formats for the first time. For example, we now can analyze student performance by disaggregating student performance within socio-economic status strands. This

contributes to a greater and more nuanced understanding, but there are numerous other important ways of studying student performance that are not yet available. In the same vein, the CDE revealed for the first time, data about repeat Algebra takers. We ought to have such information about all relevant grades and subjects available to the public.

One of the most gaping holes in the data released today concerns the performance of California's English Language Learners. But here too, the constraints and limitations of California's data system make such an analysis difficult. There is much we don't know.

For example, California needs the ability to track the progress of ELLs across the various

levels of the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), and analyze pathways toward reclassification. Indeed, the CELDT itself ought to be administered along the same timelines as the CSTs, so data is made available to educators in a timely and informative manner. Finally, the academic performance of ELLs ought to be disaggregated by ethnicity.

There are steps underway to develop a much more robust data system in California, albeit happening at a sluggish pace. We should accelerate the development of a world class education data system, linked to other important data sets, to make sure we know all we need to about California's public schools and how to make them work better.

**Step II:
Find what works, and do it, a lot.**

California's STAR results reveal a by now an unfortunately familiar narrative. Latino, African American, and low-income students lag behind their peers in every grade level and in every subject.

This need not be the story. We continue to give less of everything that matters most in education – especially qualified, effective teachers – to those who already start off with the least. The predictable underperformance that emerges from such inequity is a gap of opportunity and a gap of access.

We can close this gap not by blaming the students who bear its burdens, but by focusing on the choices and actions of the adults who bear the power and the responsibility for shaping the environments in which students learn and succeed, or do not. Demographics are not destiny. To act or think otherwise is to perpetuate the myth that low levels of performance are inevitable, and equitable academic achievement is an unattainable goal. It is not.

We know this because of the actions of courageous educators across the state who work relentlessly to bring about high achievement. We know this because of the impressive example set by high achieving, high minority and high poverty schools from throughout California that dispel myths about low achievement every day. Annually the Education Trust—West identifies and studies these high-gaining schools. An important next step moving forward is for state and local leaders to do the same—making it imperative and possible for schools and districts to understand and replicate what works.

**Step III:
Get more to those that need more.**

In California today, the schools that educate the highest proportion of low-income students and students of color must do so with less resources per pupil, and less financial flexibility than schools serving the fewest low-income students and students of color. While more money would help, the more pressing issue is how resources are distributed, and the manner in which they are targeted – or not targeted – to reach the students who need them the most.

This is about more than rich districts versus poor districts. There are specific practices and funding policies that result in an inequitable distribution of resources.

One is the hidden spending gap in teacher salaries. As we first reported in 2005, schools serving large concentrations of Latino, African-American and low-income students spend far less on their teachers than schools serving mostly White, Asian and affluent kids, within the very same district.

Taking a wider view, California's education finance system remains staggeringly, and detrimentally, complex. Although there are many contributing factors, the proportional

increase of categorical funds has contributed to both financial inefficiency and inequity. Across the state, districts with the highest proportionate amount of categorical funding have significantly worse student outcomes than those with the lowest. One reason for this is because districts are forced to spend time and money navigating the complex categorical system – time and money that could be better spent on promoting teaching and learning. Decentralizing state funding mechanisms would allow those with the best understanding of student needs the flexibility and autonomy necessary to best meet those needs.

One method of decentralization is the transition to a student-centered funding model wherein schools serving disadvantaged populations would receive increased funds to better serve their students. By linking funds to the students with the greatest needs, the students who depend upon schools the most may begin to receive the resources they need to for academic success.

Step IV: Find our most effective educators and learn from them

Quality teaching matters. In the pursuit of educational equity, nothing matters more. Research tells us that teachers are the single greatest factor in raising student success, and that students who experience many consecutive years of effective teachers close the prevailing gaps in achievement. But who are those teachers?

Because of persistent inadequacies in California's data systems, we are unable to determine even the most basic data about teachers, such as how many have advanced degrees in their subject area, how many hold a given type of credential, or how many middle school math teachers have a single subject or multiple subject credential.

More importantly, we lack the ability to identify California's most effective educators.

The teachers who consistently demonstrate excellence, working relentlessly to bring their students to ever higher levels of achievement, deserve acknowledgement and praise. They deserve to be recognized and rewarded for their success, and the success of their students. Their strengths ought to be studied and replicated.

We speak often about professional development and best practices, but we have no direct assessments or measurements of teacher effectiveness. We must instead rely on proxies – years of experience, post-baccalaureate units, specific graduate degrees – to merely guess at what we should be able to clearly see. What we still don't know is hurting us.

Conclusion

Today's release of the 2008 STAR reports paints a bleak portrait of what is happening in California's schools. The CST trend data show only small, incremental gains, and in some cases declining student performance. Worse still, achievement gaps persist between low-income, Latino and African-American students and their White, Asian and more affluent counterparts—at every grade level and in every subject. Past gains are fading, and disastrous gaps in achievement continue to grow.

