



# Raising African American Student Achievement: California Goals, Local Outcomes

**AFRICAN AMERICANS WERE 7.6%**—about a half-million—of California’s K–12 students in 2006–07. As a group, these students’ academic performance is a serious concern, but they often get lost in California’s policy debates about improving student achievement, in part because they represent such a small proportion of students.

As the state reflects anew on statewide achievement gaps and looks toward a common future that benefits all students, this is an opportune moment to ask:

- How are African American students in California’s public K–12 system doing?
- What do we know about how and where these students are succeeding academically?

## California’s African American students are concentrated in relatively few counties and districts

Two-thirds of California’s African American students attended school in only five of 58 counties in 2006–07: Alameda, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Bernardino, and San Diego. Within these counties, most African American students attended schools in only a few districts. For example, two-thirds of the 165,635 African American students in Los Angeles County attended schools in four unified districts: Los Angeles, Long Beach, Compton, and Inglewood.

In addition, African American students represented more than 7.6% of students in only eight counties. At the highest, 20% of students in Solano County and 17% in Alameda County were African American. These concentrations can vary substantially within counties. For example, in Alameda County, 38% of students in Oakland Unified were African American; but nearby Emery Unified School District (in Emeryville) was 61% African American—higher than any other California district.

## Raising overall African American student achievement is a work in progress

African American student achievement in California is improving. But the state has more to do.

### *African American achievement in English and math has improved, but challenges remain*

In English language arts, the percentages of African American students who scored proficient or advanced on the California Standards Tests (CSTs) improved between 2003 and 2007: from 27% to 39% in grade 4, and from 20% to 32% in grade 7. And the percentages scoring below or far below basic in these grades declined. But African American students remain much less likely to score highly on these CSTs than their Asian or white peers, and in grade II the average achievement of African American students has remained largely flat.

In mathematics, African American achievement is below that of Asian, Hispanic/Latino, and white students, but it improved between 2003 and 2007. The percentage of African American students scoring proficient or advanced increased from 28% to 41% in grade 4, and from 12% to 22% in grade 7, with lower percentages scoring below or far below basic.

The proportion of African American 8th graders taking Algebra I nearly doubled during this time, from 24% to almost 46%. Notably, the percentage of these students who scored advanced or proficient on the Algebra I CST also increased, from 17% to 20%. On the other hand, few African American students complete the “college prep” math sequence—Algebra I, geometry, and Algebra II—by the end of grade 10. Only about 9% of African American 11th graders had done so in 2007.

### *California has more to do to foster postsecondary success for African Americans*

African American high school graduates in 2006 had among the highest college-going rates in California: 48% enrolled in one of the state’s public postsecondary systems after graduating (compared with 47% of graduates overall). One-third of the state’s African American graduates enrolled in a community college in the fall of 2006.

However, recent research shows that many community college students struggle

to succeed. One report found that only 15% of degree-seeking African Americans who entered in the fall of 1998 successfully transferred to a four-year university or completed an associate’s degree or certificate within six years—lower than among Asian, Hispanic/Latino, or white students.

Several measures of college readiness show modest progress among California’s African American students:

- 26% of African American high school graduates fulfilled the “a-g” course requirements to be eligible for admission to the University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU) systems in 2006—up from 24% in 2003.
- About 2,000 more African American students took an advanced placement exam in 2007 than in 2003, and 3,200 more took the SAT, a college entrance exam.

### *African American male students experience less high school and postsecondary success than their female peers*

On average, African American male students in California experience less high school and postsecondary success than female African Americans. The most recent data show that African American females pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) in grade 10 more often than males, graduate from high school in greater numbers, and are two-thirds of African Americans who enroll at UC or CSU as first-time freshmen. African American females have been successful at earning associate’s degrees and pre-baccalaureate and professional certificates, but African American males are underrepresented among earners of all degrees.

### *African American students are overrepresented in Special Education and alternative high school programs*

African Americans’ representation in Special Education and alternative high school programs is one gauge of whether they are well served by California’s general education programs. The data show that:

- Although they were only 7.6% of students overall, African Americans were 11.4% of Special Education enrollments in 2006–07. This percentage is largest among older students and in particular Special Education categories, especially Emotional Disturbance (22.3%).
- African Americans were 11% of students in continuation high schools in 2006–07, though they were 8% of 11th graders (the most comparable age cohort) in the school population as a whole.

### Local outcomes for African American students vary widely across the state

A closer look at local outcomes among California districts and schools reveals wide variation in African American student achievement across the state and promising areas for further inquiry into local practices and policies.

#### *African American student achievement varies widely across the 13 California districts that enroll the most African American students*

Thirteen unified districts enrolled 43% of California's African American students in 2006–07. These districts' African American Growth Academic Performance Index (API) scores in 2007 ranged from 580 to 673, compared to a score of 643 for all African American students statewide. (California's overall API score for all students was 728.)

- **Inglewood**, which has one of the highest poverty rates among the 13 districts, consistently receives African American Growth API scores that exceed those for all African American students in the state. Inglewood's score of 652 was fourth-highest among the 13 districts in 2007.
- **San Diego, Long Beach, and Elk Grove**—districts that are quite different from one another in many respects—consistently earn African American Growth API scores that exceed those for all African American students in the state.
- In **Fresno** and **Sacramento City**, African American achievement improved notably

compared with other districts among the 13 that started with similar African American API scores in 2003.

#### *African American students in some California schools are doing very well on the API*

In some schools, African American students are doing very well academically. These include regular public schools, magnet schools, and charter schools representing different sizes and demographic patterns. In 2007:


- **Forty-five elementary schools had an African American Growth API of 785 or higher.** These elementary schools were located across seven counties and varied in size from 221 to 1,161 students. These schools reveal how much African American student achievement can vary within a district. For example, Bursch Elementary and Bunche Elementary in Compton Unified received African American Growth API scores of 849 and 836 in 2007, respectively, compared with a districtwide score of 580.
- **Eighteen middle schools had an African American Growth API of at least 748.** These middle schools are located across eight counties and generally served more than 1,000 students. However, they included five public charter schools that enrolled no more than 341 students each, including three Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) schools.
- **Sixteen high schools had an African American Growth API of 736 or more.** These

high schools were located across seven counties and varied dramatically in size from 318 to 3,942 students. Although the elementary and middle schools described above all enrolled higher percentages of African American students than the state overall, six of the 16 high schools did not. Four of the five high schools with the highest African American Growth APIs in the state were not comprehensive schools.

### Improving the academic achievement and attainment of California's African American students should become a higher state priority

Although state-level data contain much sobering news, this is only one part of the story. Looking across districts and schools makes clear that much can be done—and is being done—to support African American students academically.

A key question for California educators and policymakers is what policies and practices contribute to variation in African American student achievement among California districts and schools. Policies and practices that appear to result in improved African American achievement need to be documented and widely shared.

Although California has much to do to improve African American student achievement, the local outcomes summarized here make clear that it can be done. 

#### Selected Stories: EdSource Online

As a supplement to EdSource's main report, *Raising African American Student Achievement: California Goals, Local Outcomes*, the EdSource website ([www.edsource.org/stu\\_AAachievement08.cfm](http://www.edsource.org/stu_AAachievement08.cfm)) includes:

- Further data on schools that received particularly high African American Growth API scores in 2007.
- Edited transcripts from interviews that EdSource conducted with principals at some of these schools—representing a diverse range of school types, school sizes, demographic patterns, and locations—to discuss these leaders' perspectives on the strategies they think play a key role in outcomes for the African American students at their schools.



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