

Holding School Districts Accountable

School district leaders not only have to make fiscally sound decisions, but they also must ensure that their financial decisions support the district's and state's goals for student achievement. And they must let the community review their decisions at public meetings. This guide explains the oversight of districts and how community members can get involved.

Do districts have an Academic Performance Index (API) score?

Yes, a district's API score is based on the test performance of all the students in the district as a whole. However, there is no ranking of districts that compares them based on their API scores. The Ed-Data Partnership website lists district API scores at www.ed-data.k12.ca.us as part of its district accountability reports.

What about the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)?

Districts, like schools, must make "adequate yearly progress (AYP)" toward all students scoring proficient in English and math by 2013–14. There are set threshold scores that districts must meet each year based on state tests. (These scores are determined by the percent of students scoring proficient or advanced in English and math in spring testing.)

As part of making AYP, districts must also reach a certain API score or must raise their score by one point. For 2004–05 through 2006–07, that API score is 590. In addition, districts must test 95% of their students, and high school and unified districts must attain a specified high school graduation rate or show a certain amount of improvement.

Like schools, districts that for two years in a row do not make AYP must, in most cases, participate in the NCLB intervention called **Program Improvement (PI)**. However, a district would not enter PI if it could show that students in any of three specific grade spans (3–5, 6–8, or 10) have in either year met the AYP criteria that the district as a whole failed. Schools and districts must inform parents if they are in PI and explain what steps they are taking to improve. This information must be presented in English and, to the extent practicable, in one or more other languages that parents can more easily understand.

Based on the 2004 AYP results, 142 California school districts entered PI. During the first year of PI, districts must do a self-assessment and get support from their county office or other approved body. If a district does not improve after two years, it faces serious sanctions in the third year, such as replacing staff or restructuring the district. In order to exit PI, a district must make AYP for two years in a row.

Is there a public record that explains how my district is doing?

Information about the district must be included on each school's **School Accountability Report Card (SARC)**. SARCs must contain student demographics (i.e., breakdowns of students based on ethn-

city, poverty, disabilities, and home language); academic data; teacher and staff information, including whether teachers have credentials in the subjects that they teach and whether there are vacant teaching positions; fiscal data; the condition of facilities and availability of textbooks; AYP status; and information about school safety.

Parents must be told how to access SARCs, either through the Internet or paper copies. SARCs must be understandable and, if more than 15% of a district's students have a home language other than English, must be translated into that language. SARCs are supposed to be updated annually, though many districts have fallen behind. If your school has not made its SARC available to you, ask your principal for a copy.

Does my district's budget support student achievement?

District budgets can be complicated and difficult to understand, but they reveal district priorities. Salary levels, number of teachers per student, staffing arrangements, such as whether counselors are hired, all indicate what the district considers important. For more information, go to the Ed-Data website: www.ed-data.k12.ca.us. For a more in-depth discussion of district budgets, see the EdSource publication, *Understanding School District Budgets: A guide for local leaders at: www.edsource.org/pub_abs_budgetguide04.cfm*

What is the official budget review process?

Each spring, the school district superintendent submits a proposed budget for the next school year to the local school board. A required public hearing provides a formal setting for community input. A school board–approved budget must be submitted by June 30 to the superintendent of the county office of education, who reviews the budget to ensure that it is fiscally sound. The county superintendent then approves, conditionally approves, or disapproves it. Districts with *approved* budgets proceed with the implementation of their programs as planned. (For a few districts, such as San Francisco, the city school district and county office of education are one and the same. For those districts, the state takes over the role of the county.)

If a budget is *conditionally approved* or *disapproved*, the county office of education explains its concerns to the district and sets up formal processes for revising the budget, which include public hearings.

In December the district completes a **First Interim Report** of its financial situation for the current school year. The report is presented at a public hearing and submitted to the county superintendent, who issues a **positive certification** saying that the district will meet its financial obligations for the current and subsequent two fiscal years; a **qualified certification** indicating that it may not be able to do so; or a **negative certification** predicting that it will be unable to do so. The same process and reporting accompanies the **Second Interim Report** in mid-March.

When a district receives a qualified or negative certification, it loses some of its financial autonomy. For example, the county can review its collective bargaining agreements and it is prohibited from taking on certain financial obligations. It must also submit a **Third Interim Report** at the end of the fiscal year.

How do parents and community members get involved?

Beyond this official review process, district staff, school principals, parents, teachers, and other district stakeholders frequently make arguments and lobby district officials over budget allocations outside of official public meetings. Sometimes decisions are based on new research and evaluations, but often they are made in response to pressures by parents and other stakeholders.

In some districts, parents are well organized and regularly lobby district officials. In others, parents are less familiar with the process. If parents want to have some say over how their district spends its funds, they need to meet with other parents, attend meetings, insist on getting copies of important documents, and learn how the process works in their district. Any document presented at a public meeting of the school board—such as budgets, interim reports, and audits—must be made available to parents and community members on request, though the district can charge a fee for providing individual copies.

Are districts subject to financial audits?

Once the books are closed for a school year, an independent auditor must conduct a **final audit** of the district's financial records. The report must be presented at a public meeting and include a management letter that highlights any problems the auditors found—including serious “audit exceptions”—plus recommendations for addressing them. The absence of audit exceptions does not necessarily mean that a district has no financial worries. Similarly, a long list of recommendations does not automatically show that district officials are acting irresponsibly. The audit provides important—but not complete—information with which to evaluate a district's operations and its future financial health.

County offices also review district audits and are required to inform the state superintendent of public instruction and the state controller's office if any audits include exceptions related to state funding.

What happens if my district is having financial trouble?

Districts can get help from the state-funded Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT). FCMAT has established regional teams of experts that can be used as advisers when needed and also provides training for school business officials. When a district faces a negative certification, FCMAT develops an improvement plan, providing progress reports to both local and state authorities.

Sometimes the state provides an emergency loan to a district. When that happens, the state also appoints a trustee who has veto power over district actions.

How will I know if my district is having financial problems?

District school boards must hold public meetings about budget issues. There are also 15 specific warning signs that a district may be having financial problems. They include problems with the district's governance structure, record-keeping, financial planning processes, and openness to public input and scrutiny. For the full list of 15 signs and further explanation, go to www.fcmat.org and click on the FCMAT Predictors button.

The county office of education must investigate the district's finances if more than three of the specific warning signs are in evidence.


What if school facilities are in bad condition?

Based on the settlement of the *Williams v. California* lawsuit, county superintendents must now ensure that low-performing schools—ranked in the bottom 30% (deciles 1–3) based on the Academic Performance Index (API)—have textbooks for every student, safe and clean facilities, and teachers with the right credentials. (See www.decentsschools.org or www.cde.ca.gov and click on “Williams case” for more information.)

However, all schools—no matter how they are ranked on the API—must post signs in every classroom that explain the standards for facilities. Any school that receives funding from the state's School Facilities Grant Program must establish a facilities inspection system to ensure that schools are well maintained.

How do I complain about a problem in my district?

Under the *Williams* settlement, all districts must have a uniform complaint process for complaints regarding insufficient or damaged instructional materials, unsafe or unhealthy facilities, and teacher vacancies or teachers without the right credentials. The complaint process must include a standard form that explains where to file the complaint and a person or unit responsible for handling complaints. To see a sample complaint form, go to www.cde.ca.gov and click on “Williams case.” Complaints may be filed anonymously.

If the complaint involves problems beyond the school, the principal has 10 working days to forward the complaint to the district. The principal or district superintendent should remedy a valid complaint within 30 working days. If the person complaining is not satisfied, that person can go to the school board. Every three months, the district must report a summary of complaints made and how they were resolved to the school board and county superintendent. All complaints and responses are public records. 



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