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## Executive Summary

# California's Lowest-Performing Schools

In 2000 California issued its first ranking of public schools based on an Academic Performance Index (API) score. Derived solely from 1999 student test results on the Stanford-9 test of basic skills, the API summarized into one number each school's student test scores across grade levels and subjects. Schools were then ranked into 10 deciles, with California's lowest-performing 20% of schools making up Deciles 1 and 2. The February 2003 EdSource report—*California's Lowest-Performing Schools: Who they are, the challenges they face, and how they're improving*—provides a profile of that first group of lowest-ranked schools and describes the progress they have made under substantial pressure for improvement.

### Who were the first schools identified as lowest performing?

Out of about 8,000 schools, 6,815 received a 1999 Base API score, which could range from a low of 200 to a high of 1000. The 1,362 schools ranked as Decile 1 or 2 in 1999 included:

- ✓ 968 elementary schools with API scores ranging from 302 to 496;
- ✓ 222 middle schools with API scores ranging from 345 to 513; and
- ✓ 172 high schools with API scores ranging from 297 to 523.

The geographic distribution of these schools did not follow a discernible pattern. Some urban areas have high percentages of struggling schools and some do not. The same is true in the many rural counties in California.

However, the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools were concentrated in big urban school districts. About 40% of the Decile 1 & 2 schools were in the 10 largest districts in the state, yet these districts had just 19% of the schools that received API scores. Further, more than half of the 565 schools in Los Angeles Unified School District were in Decile 1 or 2 in 1999.

The closest to a universal characteristic among the student populations of these schools is a relatively high level of student poverty. Many but not all of them have high percentages of students who were English learners and/or Hispanic, a statistic that is highly correlated with student poverty. Most have very small populations of white students. The data show that no single student characteristic is present at all the Decile 1 & 2 schools and none automatically leads to low performance.

The Decile 1 & 2 schools tended to be larger than average and were much more likely to be on a multi-track, year-round calendar. In terms of staffing, they had a much higher proportion of teachers not fully credentialed and were also more likely to have a high percentage of first- and second-year teachers.

### How can the progress of these schools best be evaluated?

In developing this EdSource report, the goal was first to look at the progress of the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools and determine which of them had raised their API scores most and most consistently. Second was to learn more about the conditions, practices, or policies that could have contributed to the difference. To that end, EdSource looked at the progress of the schools through 2002, established criteria for what would constitute "exemplary progress," and identified schools that had met those criteria. In addition, EdSource identified a group of "Beating the Odds" schools that were similar to the majority of 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools in terms of the socioeconomic status of the students they served, but who were in the top half of schools based on their initial API scores and continued to do well. Along with data, a survey of the principals of both the Decile 1 & 2 and the Beating the Odds schools and interviews with school district officials provided more information.

### How have the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools progressed?

Over the three years that California has operated its school accountability system, the average API scores for all schools have risen, with elementary schools showing the most progress. In addition, the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools have made greater point gains than the schools in the original Deciles 3 to 10. They have done less well, however, at meeting their state-set growth targets for all students. Growth targets are set based on percentage of improvement towards a score of 800, thus lower-performing schools have bigger targets. About a third of the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools have met their schoolwide growth targets all three years, 29% have met all their annual targets for significant subgroups of students (based on socioeconomic status and ethnicity), and 25% have done both.

### Some elementary schools made exemplary progress

Among the 968 Decile 1 & 2 elementary schools, a total of 109, or about 11%, met EdSource criteria for exemplary progress. (See the full report for a description of these criteria.) No high schools and only one middle school fully met the criteria, but a handful met a somewhat lower but still noteworthy threshold.

To the extent that the Exemplary Progress elementary schools varied statistically from the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 elementary schools as a whole, they faced slightly greater challenges. On average, they had either similar or even more challenging proportions of English learners and students living in poverty. School sizes are modestly larger. The proportion of fully credentialed teachers is somewhat lower. And they do not differ, on average, when it comes to teacher experience levels.

To order the full report, *California's Lowest-Performing Schools: Who they are, the challenges they face, and how they're improving*, go to the EdSource website or contact the office directly.

To learn more about our organization, please contact:

**EdSource**  
4151 Middlefield Rd.  
Suite 100  
Palo Alto, CA  
94303-4743  
650/857-9604  
Fax: 650/857-9618  
E-mail:  
edsourcesource@edsourcesource.org

Or visit us on the web:  
www.edsourcesource.org

Perhaps the most striking feature of the 109 elementary schools is that 75 of them are in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The district accounted for 230 or about 24% of the original 1999 Decile 1 & 2 elementary schools and about 8% of all elementary schools statewide. Thus, LAUSD had a disproportionate share of schools in Deciles 1 & 2 in 1999, but also had a greatly disproportionate share of the schools that have shown exemplary progress on the API since.

### Among the most improved schools, a curriculum-based focus seems to make a difference

Consistent with much research, California's school reforms have called for schoolwide adoptions of a unified, well-integrated curriculum and instructional approach. This schoolwide focus means that all teachers are using the same books, have had the same training on how to use the curriculum effectively, share a common set of expectations for student performance, and use the same methods to assess student progress and help students who are having trouble.

LAUSD has tried, apparently with substantial success, to help schools develop this schoolwide focus by, for example, pushing them to adopt a reading curriculum and orient their instruction, leadership dynamics, and staff interaction around it. LAUSD officials say that in the low-performing schools that are improving, teachers are working together differently, with greater teamwork, regular meetings, and increased professional support for each other. Central to this change, they believe, has been the district's expectation that every teacher would take part in training on how to use the new instructional materials. After that basic training, the district also provides ongoing coaching to teachers. Continued professional development is seen as critical for additional improvement.

School leadership practice also seems to relate to school performance. For example, among elementary principals responding to the EdSource survey, principals at Beating the Odds schools were much more likely to report that they spent more than half their time on instructional issues.

### The effect of other school factors and strategies is less clear

Some factors that might be expected to affect a school's performance on the API did not seem to have much impact. For example, many Exemplary Progress schools had percentages of less than fully credentialed teachers and staff turnover comparable to those that did not show as much progress. On the other hand, principals at the Beating the Odds schools generally rated staff morale and cohesion substantially higher than the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools did, though whether this was a cause or effect of higher student performance is unclear.

Many school districts are also adding programs to provide extra support or encouragement to individual students. The EdSource survey gave principals the opportunity to describe the interventions they used most. Almost all, no matter what their school's performance, mentioned the addition of before- or after-school instructional time. Interestingly, the Beating the Odds and Exemplary Progress schools were substantially more likely to also be retaining students at benchmark grade levels if their performance was not up to acceptable standards.

### What gets in the way of elementary school progress?

While most of the 1999 Decile 1 & 2 schools are making progress, at least 45 of them each year made no or negative progress, and at

least 87 more made less than 15 points of progress. These were schools in the same cities and districts, often serving children from the same backgrounds. Some of them also adopted the same curriculum programs, had teachers with similar backgrounds, and had similar opportunities for professional development.

From interviews and survey responses, it appears that the factors that stand in the way of a school's ability to improve may include:

- ✓ Excessive personnel changes and turnover;
- ✓ Overcrowded and inadequate facilities that force students to travel long distances to get to schools that have room;
- ✓ The belief system around learning or the culture of a school, particularly if its students have not done well for a long time;
- ✓ Teacher staffing issues, including attitude, ability, a lack of teamwork, and a lack of time for teachers to work together and develop the skills they need;
- ✓ Student factors such as student mobility, poverty, and English learner status.

### Lack of improvement at middle and high schools could have multiple causes

Middle and high schools have consistently shown less improvement on the API than elementary schools. Theories regarding their disappointing performance are plentiful, but clear evidence regarding its causes is much more rare.

From a purely statistical perspective, secondary schools often face different challenges than elementary schools do in attempting to meet their API growth targets because they tend to be larger and have more student subgroups. Another factor could be the alignment between the secondary curricula and the Stanford-9 test, upon which API scores were almost exclusively based through 2002. In addition, the students now in California's high schools—and middle schools to a lesser extent—have not had the full benefit of the state's investment in K–12 education since the mid-to-late 1990s. From an instructional perspective as well, the state has put more focus on improving achievement in the earliest grades.

The survey responses of middle and high school principals also stood out from those of their elementary counterparts in some interesting and potentially revealing ways. They mentioned the need to address student motivation around testing and standards, and they also focused on reading as the most critical student skill deficit, particularly at the high school level.

### A focus on academic progress aids improvement

Some schools in California have for years beaten the odds by demonstrating strong student performance at schools with overwhelming numbers of students whose demographic characteristics might predict otherwise. Further, many schools that were doing very poorly just a few years ago are making important improvements. From the information available, it appears that these schools have no magic formula or silver bullet. Among them, they are using a variety of different strategies and interventions that seem to be raising student achievement. Perhaps most of all, their experiences suggest that a purposeful and firm emphasis on improving the academic progress of all students, combined with the allocation of resources consistent with that goal—including teachers, professional development, textbooks, and extra support—can indeed make a difference. 