



The State's Official Measures of School Performance

In California today, many measures are available to tell you about student and school performance. This guide describes the measures state officials use to evaluate schools and school districts, explaining what they are and what they indicate.

Scores on state tests

Public schools in California are required to administer several tests to their students. These test scores are not the only or necessarily the most accurate way to evaluate a student's academic progress. They do give the state a way to compare all schools using the same measure. Teachers and parents can use test scores like a thermometer to get a general indication of whether a student is doing well or if there might be cause for concern. Looking at test score data for a school or district—or for the state as a whole—can serve a similar purpose.

The California Standards Tests (CSTs)

These tests are based on the state's academic content standards—what teachers are expected to teach and what students are expected to learn. (Copies of these standards are available at: www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss) The exams are primarily multiple choice, but for fourth and seventh graders they also include a writing test. Figure I shows the subjects and grades that were tested in 2005.

Students' scores on the CSTs are rated as: far below basic, below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced. The state goal is for every student to score at proficient or above.

California's academic standards—and the CSTs—are challenging and rigorous. A proficient score represents a high level of mastery. On the other hand, when students score "far below basic" it means

figure 1 | 2005 California Standards Tests

Subject Area	Grades Tested
English language arts	2-11
Writing	4 and 7
General math	2-8 and 11*
Subject specific math (including Algebra I, geometry, and Algebra II; or integrated math)	8-11
History/social science	8, 10, and 11
General science†	5
Subject specific science (including biology, chemistry, physics, and earth science; or integrated science)	9-11

* The summative math test is given to high school students who previously completed Algebra II or Integrated Math III.
† Tests for grades 8 and 10 are being developed.

DATA: CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE)

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that their test performance demonstrates little or no command of the subject. The California Department of Education cautions that these test scores should never be used as the sole criterion for important decisions about individual students, such as placement in special programs and promotion or retention.

To find out how students statewide performed on the CSTs, or how students in a specific school or district did, go to: <http://star.cde.ca.gov>

California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE)

Beginning with the class of 2006, California students must pass the CAHSEE to receive a high school diploma. It is a pass-fail exam divided into two sections. The English language arts (reading and writing) section tests the state standards through 10th grade, and the mathematics section tests math through Algebra I. Most of the questions are multiple choice, though students also have to write one essay.

High school students take the test for the first time in 10th grade and have

multiple chances to pass. Once students pass a section of the test, they do not take it again. Schools are expected to provide extra help and support to students who do not pass the test.

As of spring 2004, 64% of the class of 2006 statewide had passed both sections of the test, thus meeting the graduation requirement. This composite rate is only calculated annually. The most recent statewide, county, district, and school level results for each section are posted at: <http://cahsee.cde.ca.gov/reports.asp>

Other tests that the state requires of some students

- **California Achievement Tests, Sixth Edition Survey (CAT/6)** is taken at the same time as the CSTs and measures basic skills. Scores indicate the performance of each student relative to a national sample of students. Starting in 2005, only third and seventh graders took the CAT/6.
- **Spanish Assessment of Basic Education, Second Edition (SABE/2)** is a

Spanish-language test administered to Spanish-speaking students in grades 2–II who have been enrolled in California schools for less than one year. It covers mathematics and reading and writing in Spanish.

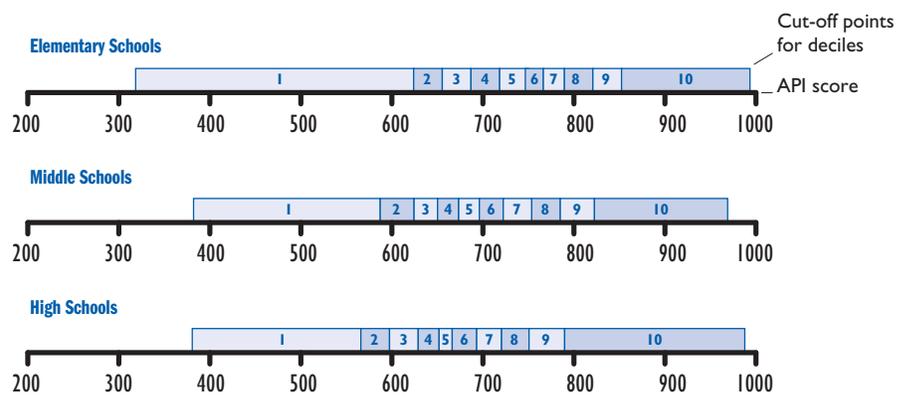
- **California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA)** is for students with severe disabilities who are unable to take the CSTs. Rather than multiple-choice questions, CAPA is open-ended, with teachers assisting in recording the answers.
- **California English Language Development Test (CELDT)** is given only to students whose primary language is not English. They take the CELDT when they first enroll in school and each year after until school officials determine that they have become English proficient. The CELDT evaluates a student's ability to listen, speak, read, and write in English.

School accountability measures

The state and federal governments both want to be able to use the scores from standardized tests to hold schools and school districts accountable for the academic performance of their students. But using test scores to evaluate the performance of a whole school—or school district—gets complicated. For example, a typical school has CST scores for students in three or four grade levels, in three or more academic subjects, based on five performance levels. On top of that, many people believe it is critical to further analyze the data to compare the performance of different subgroups of students based on their ethnicity, family income, first language, and whether they have a disability.

For California, state and federal leaders have developed two different methods for summarizing test scores. They hope these summary measures will help the public understand how well a school is doing and provide a straightforward way to identify schools and school districts with unacceptable performance. The disadvantage is that these methods can oversimplify

figure 2 | Decile Ranks for 2004 Base API Scores



DATA: ED-DATA PARTNERSHIP WEBSITE, www.ed-data.k12.ca.us, MAY 2005

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the complex picture of student achievement that exists at every school. The two methods can also produce conflicting results, as described in the box on page 3.

California's Academic Performance Index (API)

With rare exceptions, every school in California is assigned an API score that is calculated from student test scores. Each school receives an API score between 200 and 1000. A school's API score is used in three different ways:

- Schools of the same type (elementary, middle, and high schools) are ranked into deciles that each represent 10% of schools. Schools in Decile I have the lowest scores, and schools in Decile 10 have the highest. *Schools' decile rankings tell you how they compare to all other schools.* No matter how much the overall scores improve, there will always be 10% of schools in the bottom decile.
- *Schools are also compared to the 100 schools most like them in terms of student background and some other factors* because test scores are strongly correlated with student characteristics. Based on their API score, schools receive a similar school ranking between one and 10. The similar school ranking can tell you how well your school does compared to other schools that face a similar level of challenge. It is important to know, however, that the student make-up of "similar

schools" can be quite different. Challenge is measured by combining many different factors into a School Characteristic Index (SCI), including the percent of students learning English as a second language, students' qualification for free meal programs, their parents' education level, and some school characteristics such as the percent of credentialed teachers.

- Finally, *the state gives schools a target for improving their API score and tracks the change from one year to the next.* The goal is for every school to have an API score of at least 800. A school's growth target is 5% of the difference between its current score and the state's goal of 800. Schools with API scores of 800 and above need only maintain their score at that level. Schools with the lowest API scores have higher growth targets, but they also have more room to grow.

The bar chart (Figure 2) indicates the score ranges on the 2004 Base API for each decile for elementary, middle, and high schools. These scores were released in March 2005 and were based on spring 2004 test results.

The federal measure: Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

The federal approach to accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) focuses on the achievement of

figure 3 | **Percent of Students Statewide who Scored Proficient and Above on the California Standards Tests in 2004**

Student Subgroup	English Language Arts (Target 12%)	Mathematics (Target 12.8%)
African American (not of Hispanic origin)	24.6 %	23.0 %
Asian	59.3 %	68.9 %
Filipino	53.2 %	55.6 %
Hispanic or Latino	22.2 %	27.3 %
Native American/Alaska Native	32.4 %	33.4 %
Pacific Islander	33.6 %	37.0 %
White (not of Hispanic origin)	56.0 %	55.0 %
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	22.0 %	27.7 %
English Learner	18.0 %	27.0 %
Students with Disabilities	14.7 %	17.2 %

In 2005, the statewide targets increase to 23% for English and 23.7% for math.

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API and AYP give different pictures of a school's performance

These two examples illustrate how the state and federal approaches to accountability can present conflicting answers to the question of whether a school is meeting expectations for student performance. (The names of both schools are fictional, but the data is taken from real situations.)

Top API Elementary

An API score of 812 put this school in the ninth decile for its 2003 Base API. Based on 2004 test scores, it met both its schoolwide and subgroup growth targets and thus was deemed successful based on the state measure.

This school did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), however, because only 11.5% of its English language learners scored proficient and above on the English CST in 2004, missing the elementary school target of 13.6%.

Strong Subgroup Elementary

An API score of 642 put this school in the second decile for its 2003 Base API. Based on 2004 test scores, it did not meet its growth targets and thus failed to satisfy the state's measure of success.

However, this school made AYP because all of its student subgroups met the statewide proficiency targets for elementary schools of 13.6% for English and 16% for math on the 2004 CSTs.

every subgroup of students. (See Figure 3.) Further, the primary measure of success is that a specific—and gradually increasing—percentage of each subgroup of students scores “proficient” or “advanced” on the CSTs in English and math. Schools are also held accountable for testing 95% of students in each subgroup. Failure to do

so results in the same sanctions that occur if student performance is below expectations. A school's API score—and its graduation rate if it is a high school—must also meet a baseline expectation.

Both individual schools and school districts as a whole that meet these standards are said to have made AYP—

Adequate Yearly Progress. Schools and districts that fail to make AYP over consecutive years (and that receive funding from the Title I program that supports low-income students) face an escalating set of consequences—from providing tutoring services to shutting the school down—within a process called Program Improvement.

One complication is that California state law mandates that schools give parents the option of not having their student tested. But these parent opt-outs do not excuse schools from the federal participation requirement. Thus a school or district can fail to meet AYP because parents exercised their rights under California law.

The state publishes an Accountability Progress Report that details both API and AYP results for every school and school district. To see those results, go to: <http://ayp.cde.ca.gov/reports.asp>. For a summary of the information, go to the Ed-Data Partnership website: www.ed-data.k12.ca.us

Completion rates: High schools only

Federal law also requires that high schools be evaluated based on the number of students who complete 12th grade. High school completion can be reported based on the number of students who drop out of school or the percentage who graduate compared to those who started. California does not yet, on a statewide basis, have a data system that tracks individual students. As a result, these measures are all estimates based on a combination of state data and local reporting, and all are somewhat inaccurate.

Dropout rates

The one-year dropout rate is calculated using enrollment data submitted by school districts and simply indicates how many students in grades 7–12 districts reported as dropouts in a given year. The statewide one-year dropout rate was 3.3% in 2003–04.

The four-year derived dropout rate is an estimate of the percent of students who

would drop out between ninth and 12th grade based on data collected for a single year. The statewide four-year derived dropout rate was 13.3% in 2003–04.

Graduation rates

These attempt to describe the percentage of ninth graders who earned high school diplomas. There are two approaches, each of which has its disadvantages.

For school accountability purposes (under NCLB), the state takes the number of graduates and divides it by graduates plus dropouts over the last four years. For example, say that 1,000 students graduated from a school in 2004. Over the previous four years that school counted a total of 100 dropouts, so presumably the class started with 1,100 students. And $1,000/1,100 = 91$, giving the school a 91% graduation rate. This method can overestimate the graduation rate because local schools often under-report the number of students who drop out. By this calculation, the statewide graduation rate in 2003–04 was 85.1%.

A second graduation rate calculation simply divides the number of graduates by the ninth-grade enrollment four years prior. This method can underestimate the graduation rate in part because it does not account for students who graduated early, moved, or took alternative paths such as passing the California High School Proficiency Exam (CHSPE). However, data from a variety of other sources corroborate this calculation, which places the

Parents can help make state testing effective

To help ensure that state tests are accurate measures of a student's best performance, parents can:

- Be aware of the school's testing calendar and make sure their student goes to school on testing days,
- Speak to their children about the importance of doing their best on the test, and
- Make sure their child goes to school well-rested and with a healthy breakfast the day of the test.

To keep test scores in perspective, parents can:

- Talk to the student's teacher about the test scores and what they may indicate about specific strategies for helping the student improve;
- Understand that test scores are just one measure of student performance and find out all the methods the school uses to evaluate students' strengths and areas for growth.

statewide graduation rate in 2003–04 at 70.7%, an increase from a low point of 64% in 1994–95.

Some things to keep in mind

As Figure 3 on page 3 shows, substantial gaps exist between the achievement of groups of students in California. African American, Latino, and Native American students; English learners; students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged; and Special Education students are all less likely to score proficient on state tests. The same gap exists in dropout and graduation rates. Many people believe that this achievement gap is the most pressing and difficult problem California faces in regard to student performance.

Because of limitations in its current data system, California is unable to

answer many questions about student performance. For example, it is not possible to determine which students in one subgroup—such as Latinos—are also in another subgroup, such as English learners. Doing so could help illuminate achievement gap issues in a much more sophisticated way.

With the current data system the state is also unable to accurately track a group of students over time, something that would help illuminate the extent to which a school is helping those students improve. It is even difficult to get current data regarding how many students have passed both sections of the state's exit exam. The state is working on a new data system, but it will be at least a year and probably longer before it is used for any of these purposes. ■■



EdSource is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization established in California in 1977. Independent and impartial, EdSource strives to advance the common good by developing and widely distributing trustworthy, useful information that clarifies complex K-12 education issues and promotes thoughtful decisions about California's public school system.

A Spanish translation of this guide is available at: www.edsources.org/spa.cfm

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