

County kids shine at STAR

9/18/00
CMT

DH 2000 0338 E1

Students beat U.S. average on most fronts

By Heather Angney
STAFF WRITER

San Mateo County students bested the Stanford 9 test this year, increasing scores and exceeding the national average in 35 of 43 categories of the high-stakes test.

The scores, anxiously anticipated by parents, real estate agents and legislators alike, were released by the California Department of Education on Monday afternoon and were once again higher than state scores in all subjects.

While perennially high-performing districts will likely increase their standing in the state with this year's scores, the improvements among previously low-performing schools may be more important. Schools singled out by the state for low scores last year will be expected to boost scores over the next couple of years or face penalties.

Scores released Monday revealed the Ravenswood and Redwood City school districts, with high numbers of students with limited English skills, still have many students performing below the national average. But they did show some gains, with districtwide scores leaping up in

Stanford 9 test scores

The numbers below reflect the percentage of students in each grade who scored at or above the national average for 2000.



		Grades			
		3	5	8	10
San Mateo County	Reading	57	57	61	38
	Math	64	61	60	52
California	Reading	44	44	49	34
	Math	56	50	48	46

Source: Calif. Dept. of Education

Scores run high statewide

By Jill Tucker
STAFF WRITER

California public schools posted dramatic gains in Stanford 9 test scores this year, continuing a two-year climb from the bottom of the nation's heap, according to preliminary results released Monday.

Gov. Gray Davis called Monday a "banner day" while state Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin said the increases were "fabulous," "substantial," and "genuine

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Score: Grades two through six at or above national average

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improvements."

Scores went up in all grades and subjects tested, but especially in the early grades where state officials have focused billions of dollars in education reforms such as class size reduction.

In grades two through six, the state's students were at or above the national average across the board in mathematics. Reading scores, while still below the national average in every grade, increased by up to 9 percentage points since 1998 and in most cases are just shy of the national average.

Now in its third year, the

Stanford 9 is part of the state's annual \$40 billion testing program — evaluating students in grades two through 11 in reading, language and math. Elementary and middle school students are also tested in spelling, while high school students are tested in science and social science.

The scores are measured against a national norming sample.

The exam is part of a high-stakes accountability program. High-scoring students, teachers and schools will see cash rewards — nearly \$800 million in scholarships, bonuses and school funding. Under-performing schools could face fu-

ture financial sanctions or staffing changes.

California students scored at or above the national average in 15 of the 43 grade and subject categories — up from two in 1998.

"The major investments we have been making and are continuing to make in California public schools appear to be paying dividends," said Eastin.

Stanford University professor of education Michael Kirst said it isn't unusual for states to see increases in scores the first few years of a new testing program. As teachers become more familiar with what's on the test, they cater instruction to it, he added.

"Nationally, what we've seen over the years ... is that as educators begin to focus on a specific test, scores go up for three or four years and then they level off," he said.

Statewide, the highest scores were in second grade math and 11th grade social science, with 57 percent of those students scoring at or above the national average.

The state's lowest score was in 10th grade reading, with 33 percent of students scoring at or above the national average. State officials, however, questioned the validity of the high school reading scores — saying other states also experience low scores in those grade levels.

Local results mirrored statewide increases.

In Alameda County, students were at or above the national average in 31 of the 43 grade/subject categories — with at least 52 percent of all students above the national average in math.

In San Mateo County, students were at or above the national average in 35 categories.

Specific demographic results were not available Monday. Scores broken down by gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and English language ability are expected later this summer.

The results released Monday also include scores based on supplemental testing on California's content standards, but

state officials said the results are not preliminary, since they are still working on the validity of the questions used.

State education officials said this year's Stanford 9 scores are the early payoff of billion-dollar school reforms, including literacy programs, increased teacher training, new textbooks and after-school remedial programs, as well as class size reduction. But, they added, there's still a long way to go.

"Our reforms are working. Scores are on the rise," Davis said. "But, our expectations for students are even higher still. I will not be satisfied until every school is showing significant improvement."

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Shine: Elementary, middle school kids make biggest gains

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several categories in East Palo Alto and hopping above the national average in some areas in Redwood City.

The Stanford 9, the centerpiece of the state's Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program implemented three years ago, tests second-through 11th-graders in reading, language and math. It also tests elementary and middle school kids in spelling and high school students in science and social science.

Even students who do not speak English fluently — 22 percent of County students — are required to take the test if they have been enrolled in California schools more than 12 months. Their scores are compared to those of students nationwide. At the national level, less than two percent of test-takers are still learning English.

Resistance fading

When state legislators started requiring students take the Stanford 9 test three years ago, most public school educators resented the state intrusion. They grumbled about non-English speakers taking a test in English, about test questions not aligned to state curriculum, about second-graders answering multiple-choice questions for eight hours and about schools being judged on a single measure.

Now there is more acceptance — if not for the test itself, then for the fact the public is watching closely to see how schools perform on the test. And some school officials are saying the test does gauge basic skills.

"There are some real limits to a multiple choice test, but if a child can't read well, they're not going to do well on the test," said Mary Lairon Assistant Superintendent of the Redwood City School District said.

Although all districts are quick to point out that the test is only one measure of student achievement — and an imperfect one — many are admitting it can be helpful in driving the review of curriculum. Since the widely publicized scores started being released, many districts have instituted changes, adding special reading programs or increasing teaching in English.

The waning resistance may well have to do with increasing scores.

Several districts made notable improvements this year. Above-average reading and math scores spiked 16 to 27 percentage points in certain grades in the Bettor, Burlingame, La Honda-Pescadero, Millbrae and Ravenswood districts.

Jefferson School District, where the majority of students were at or above the national average in 13 categories last year, pulled students above that mark in seven more categories this year.

The Redwood City School

District also pulled the majority of students up to or above the national average in seven categories.

Grades 2-8 make big gains

Countywide, elementary and middle school students realized the greatest improvements. With all subjects tallied together, County kids in grades two through eight boosted themselves up 12 to 27 percentage points. They performed at or above the national average in 27 out of 28 categories. Only eighth-grade spelling scores were below the national average, and that was by only one percentage point.

Reflecting a statewide trend, San Mateo County scores showed the biggest gains in math, with second-grade scores rising nine percentage points and all other grades except 10th grade showing improvement.

High school gains were smaller, with countywide scores in grades 9 and 11 going up one or two percentage points or staying the same in each subject. The majority of students in grades 9 and 11 remained above the national average in math, language and social science, but below in reading and science.

Tenth-graders struggled in San Mateo County. Their scores declined one or two percentage points in reading, math, science and social science and stayed the same in language. Despite this they still tested above the national and state averages in math and science.

Low scores in some districts were offset by extremely high scores in others.

Students in 12 of San Mateo County's 23 districts had a majority of students scoring at or above the national average in every grade and in every subject. These districts in the top half of The County were Belmont-Redwood Shores, Burlingame, Hillsborough, Laguna Salada, Las Lomas, Menlo Park, Millbrae, Portola Valley, San Bruno, San Carlos, San Mateo-Foster City and Woodside.

In Woodside, 100 percent of fourth-graders scored at or above the national average in math.

Redwood City improves

Redwood City School District officials felt "a lot of relief and happiness" when they saw the scores, said Lairon. Scores were up in 22 of 28 categories.

Still, there are huge disparities, with North Star Academy, the magnet school for gifted students, again scoring extremely high, and schools such as Fair Oaks and Hoover, with far fewer English-speakers, coming in at the bottom of the district. While 100 percent of fifth-graders at North Star scored at or above the national average in reading and math, students making those scores in reading at Fair Oaks and Hoover measured in the teens and single digits.

"We have a long way to go,"

San Mateo County Stanford 9 results

The numbers below represent the percentage of students in each grade who scored at or above the national average.

District	TOTAL READING											TOTAL MATH																						
	Grade Level - Percent of students											Grade Level - Percent of students																						
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11														
Bayshore Elementary	'00 68	32	21	33	61	27	35	'99 45	30	39	33	33	35	47	73	57	39	47	56	58	60	'99 48	33	45	47	55	62	53						
Brisbane Elementary	'00 46	47	52	56	47	50	61	'99 51	47	62	45	56	60	74	37	54	54	49	58	59	77	'99 51	49	54	40	45	71	70						
Cabrillo Unified	'00 59	58	60	59	64	66	70	'99 54	54	64	58	57	59	71	58	65	63	67	58	54	59	65	54	60	'99 56	54	58	61	59	50	61	63	55	54
Jefferson Elementary	'00 61	50	49	41	46	47	51	'99 54	47	43	40	48	40	45	59	62	53	48	60	45	46	'99 47	53	44	39	53	36	40						
Laguna Salada Un.	'00 67	64	61	64	61	69	66	'99 64	58	62	62	63	58	66	69	63	57	65	60	70	55	'99 64	56	52	62	60	54	57						
Las Lomas Elem.	'00 84	85	90	91	82	92	92	'99 83	79	87	89	89	86	88	92	90	90	95	88	93	88	'99 81	80	93	92	91	88	91						
Millbrae Elementary	'00 75	60	64	63	62	65	70	'99 59	52	61	55	60	65	70	66	65	64	67	72	78	'99 54	48	44	49	65	69	73							
Ravenswood Elem.	'00 46	28	22	17	15	20	21	'99 30	16	11	18	13	17	22	57	48	33	31	25	35	31	'99 35	31	18	21	28	22	25						
San Bruno Elem.	'00 64	62	53	56	55	57	59	'99 59	64	57	54	55	57	65	66	60	59	60	55	54	'99 61	60	60	52	56	50	50							
S.M.-F.C. Elem.	'00 63	62	66	65	64	59	65	'99 58	60	61	62	55	63	66	67	70	71	68	70	57	60	'99 56	65	62	63	63	59	59						
Sequoia Union High	'00							'99														'99												
Woodside Elementary	'00 91	92	96	95	90	98	89	'99 85	91	95	93	84	83	86	95	94	100	95	98	92	88	'99 87	96	97	96	98	88	96						

Source: California Department of Education

Staff

Lairon said. "We owe those kids the best they can get. We're still working hard to improve those scores."

Lairon said test scores at Fair Oaks and Hoover suffered because many more kids with limited English skills took the test this year. Last year, less than half the students at Fair Oaks were tested, with most parents signing waivers freeing their children from taking the test. The state has since put more pressure on schools to test all its students.

This summer and fall, district officials and teachers will analyze the scores, looking for trends — both positive and negative — at each school, at each grade and in each classroom, Lairon said.

"We will ask the schools, 'Why do you think these things happened?'" Lairon said. "What strategies do you need to keep, what ones do we need to change and how can we help you do this?"

Last year, the district decided students needed more reading instruction and Spanish-speaking kids needed more English instruction. In all schools except Adelante, where students are immersed equally in Spanish and English, students spend 100 percent of their school day in English by the end of third grade.

Ravenswood's huge leaps

The beleaguered Ravenswood School District made a turnaround in test scores this year, pushing hundreds of students above the national average in almost every subject.

Improvements were dramatic in some areas. Last year, only 30 percent of second-graders met or exceeded the national average in reading; this year, 46

percent of fourth-graders were at or above the national average in reading; this year, 22 percent were.

"I'm real pleased because it's been something that we worked hard on as a team," said Superintendent Charlie Mae Knight, whose district serves 5,400 students in East Palo Alto and East Menlo Park.

District officials said the phonics-based Open Court reading program may have helped. Although some teachers complain the program is too rigid, the district is demanding all teachers use it — and get results.

"I think that the administration and especially the principals have focused on (test scores) as our top priority," school board member Lois Frontino said. "We gave quite a bit of support at the school site level, particularly with first- and second-year teachers. But you never really know until the scores come in."

The district is under scrutiny for more than low scores. Knight is currently facing charges of conflict of interest because she allegedly signed checks from an employee emergency fund that went to district staff who rented property from her.

"At this point in my life here in Ravenswood, I feel very excited to hear some good news for a change," Knight said Monday. "It's been a long journey, 15 years here. Finally seeing a pinnacle as opposed to a valley — it really is rewarding."

San Mateo-Foster City steady

Mirroring state trends, the San Mateo-Foster City School District made its biggest gains in the lowest grades. Across all

grades, scores improved significantly in grades 2 through 6 this year, declined slightly in grade 7 and stayed about the same in grade 8.

"We are very pleased with the steady progress our students have made over the last three years, not only on SAT-9, but on other district measures of student performance," Superintendent Rick Damello said. "We are particularly excited about the improvement of scores in mathematics that has paralleled the implementation of a new math curriculum over the last three years."

The percentage of students scoring above the national average in math ranged from 57 to 71 percent, up from a range of 56 to 65 percent in 1999 and a range of 49 percent to 60 in 1998.

The district's scores have improved in most subjects over the three years the state has offered the Stanford 9. Since 1998, the percentage of students scoring at or above the national average climbed by at least 10 percentage points in eight areas, including all subjects for second-graders, third-grade language and math, and fifth- and sixth-grade math.

San Mateo Union up in grade 9

San Mateo Union High School District officials are pointing to a new reading program to explain an increase in ninth-grade reading scores this year.

Four hundred ninth-graders who were struggling in reading took a class focused on improving that skill, and average scores in grade 9 rose above the middle of the pack, from the 49th percentile in 1999 to the 53rd percentile in 2000. At Capuchino, ninth-grade reading scores rose from the 39th per-

centage the average Capuchino ninth-grader scored better than 48 percent of test-takers nationwide.

Reading scores went up more than any other single score," district Associate Superintendent Mark Avellar said.

District officials hope that helping kids increase their reading skills will better their performance in other subjects.

"We're trying to give the kids the foundation that helps them do better in all their classes," Avellar said.

The high school reading program was started in part due to Stanford 9 scores.

"STAR testing is high-stakes testing for school districts," Avellar said. "Rightly or wrongly, the public judges schools by a single number. While we generally hold our own, we do take them seriously."

Sequoia digs deeper

The Sequoia Union High School District has created a new position partly because of the emphasis in public education on testing and accountability.

Alan Ratner, recently named director of Program Evaluation and Research, for the district serving South County high school students, started work a couple weeks ago and will be closely analyzing students' scores on the Stanford 9 and other achievement tests. He will work with teachers to find ways they can help students fix weak spots. Just as many elementary school districts do now, the district eventually plans to give teachers a breakdown of the strengths and weaknesses of individual students in their classes. That data collection system is not yet in place.

"It's a challenge," Ratner said of the system he is creating. "But I think it's a critical process considering public education's increasing responsiveness to accountability."

Dedicating time to analyzing scores is worthwhile considering how much time students spend taking the tests and teachers spend preparing students for them, Ratner said.

Sequoia's results were mixed this year.

Eleventh-grade scores improved, particularly in reading and math.

"They've been with us for three years and obviously it's working," said Assistant Superintendent for Educational Services Francisca Miranda, explaining the increases.

Ninth- and 10th-grade scores slipped as a whole, mostly falling in science and social science. In some grades, students lost ground gained between 1998 and 1999.

Sequoia High School, identified as a low-performing school by the state, followed the district trend, with lowering scores in grades nine and 10. But it saw gains in grade 11 in reading, math and science.

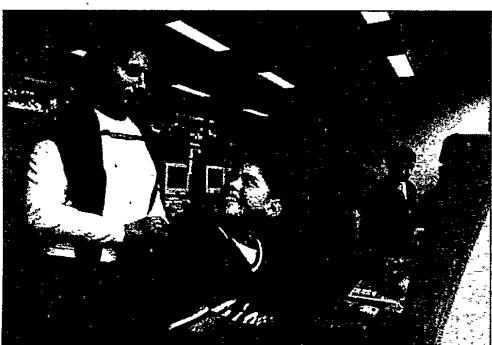
Explaining possible reasons for low scores in the first two years of high school, Miranda said some students come to the district without the skills needed for high school classes.

"Change takes a while," Miranda said. "You don't always see improvements in a year. But it's not enough for us. We have to be more diligent and aggressive to identify strategies (to help students)."

Carlmont High School was the bright spot this year, with the percentage of students scoring at or above the national average growing in 13 of 15 categories. "Carlmont showed gains substantially greater than the gains it made last year," Ratner said.

For more Stanford 9 scores, visit the California Department of Education's Web site at www.cde.ca.gov and click on STAR.

Staff writer M.L. Madison



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Fourth-grade student Cesar Jimenez, 8, smiles as he shows his teacher, Maria Ibarra, his work in a computer lab class in a summer elementary school in the Ravenswood City Elementary