

# Challenged Schools, Remarkable Results:



## Three Lessons from California's Highest Achieving High Schools

### *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

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# Executive Summary

## Overview

- At Southwest High School, a farm community hugging the Mexican border, five times as many students scored at the advanced or proficient level as their Average Yearly Progress (AYP) target. This result defies expectations for high schools with many low-income and English-learning students.
- English language learners at Garden Grove's Bolsa Grande High School outperformed comparable schools across the state by 138% in English language arts and 112% in Math. This is despite the fact that students at Bolsa speak twenty-nine different languages and nearly two-thirds are eligible for the free- or reduced-price lunch program.
- Last year, in Los Angeles, Cleveland High School's Academic Performance Index (API) reflected a 69-point improvement overall, and the API for Latino students increased almost twice as much—by 126 points. One would never guess that some of these students spend over two hours on the bus and when they arrive, the school is huge—serving almost 4,000 students.

As California's population changes, more and more of California's schools serve populations like these. These students will become the workers that will fuel the economy, and the voters that will determine the future of the Golden State. But too often, these are the kinds of children our schools shortchange.

Yet there are schools that are getting notably better results even with the most challenging students. What are these schools—including the ones cited above and others like them—doing right? What our schools need today is not one more failing grade but rather a practical plan to get better. We don't have to reinvent the wheel. The raw materials for such a plan are right here, in our own backyards.

This report examines the strategies that have helped some California high schools achieve high marks despite significant challenges.

## The Challenge

In the year 1998, California began a massive experiment that focused on testing students and holding teachers and administrators accountable for results. The goal: dramatic, system-wide improvement. Schools' performance began to be measured using California's Academic Performance Index (API). In 2001, with passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the focus became even sharper. NCLB required that all students be proficient in reading and math by the year 2014. "Annual Yearly Progress"—or AYP—measured schools' progress toward this ambitious goal. All subgroups of students had to make progress every year toward this goal of proficiency for all.

Now, in 2005, tests have been adjusted, curricula redesigned, and accountability measures debated—but overall, the results can seem discouraging. For example, the Education Trust reports that Latino eleventh graders

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typically read below the level of white seventh graders. A recent report by California’s nonpartisan Legislative Analyst estimated that dropout rates in California’s largest urban districts are above 50%. And the California State University system reports that large numbers of students who do earn a diploma still need remedial courses before they are ready for college-level studies.

Yet some schools are doing better. *The California Best Practices Study* is one of the first to use California’s new tests to identify our most successful high schools and then to take the crucial next step of launching an intensive investigation of what they are doing right. The study reveals a set of strategies that enable more high school students—of every ethnicity and English-language ability—to succeed. It shows—in detail—how some schools are beating the odds. This approach makes this study essential reading not only for school and district leaders, but for everyone willing to play a role in helping schools get better, rather than just hoping they do so.

## The Study

Springboard Schools is conducting the three-year California Best Practices Study as part of a nation-wide investigation sponsored by the National Center for Educational Accountability. Year two of the study—just completed—examined high schools state-wide serving high percentages of English learners, low-income students, and students of color. It began by identifying over 100 schools in the state that were “beating the odds” by doing better—sometimes far better—at getting students to the challenging “proficient” level on the California Standards Test than would be predicted on the basis of their student populations. Springboard then examined a much broader set of data about these schools, from dropout rates to both API and AYP, as well as the rates at which students complete challenging coursework and master English. On the basis of this complete picture we selected ten of the best of these

schools and subjected them to in-depth, on-site analysis. In order to ensure that the strategies identified really were the ones associated with better results, Springboard did a similarly detailed analysis of the work underway in a group of demographically similar schools achieving only average results.

The main finding is understood by every teacher and parent: what matters in schools is good teaching. However, this study goes beyond that platitude to discover how good schools and school districts go about ensuring that good teaching is the norm in every classroom for every child.

## Lessons from Our Own Backyards

These California schools achieving surprising results have found and applied a few key strategies to enable teachers to do their best work. Our most successful high schools serving our most challenging populations:

- 1. Use consistent curriculum and frequent diagnostic tests**  
This means they give teachers timely and useful data on who knows what and who needs what.
- 2. Find and adopt “best practices”**  
This means they use what has been proven to work instead of asking teachers to reinvent the wheel.
- 3. Invest in improvement**  
This means they spend scarce resources, including money, time, and energy, to provide teachers with time to work together, tools to do their job, and coaching on implementation in their own classrooms.

These strategies may sound simple, but they are challenging, and perhaps even revolutionary, because they call into question many commonly held beliefs about teaching and about how schools work.

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## A Closer Look at Three Key Strategies

### 1. Use consistent curriculum and frequent diagnostic tests

Traditionally, the high school teacher creates lessons, invents his or her own tests, and uses those tests to determine grades. But in high-performing high schools, this study found that teachers teaching the same course use the same curriculum, give the same tests, and work toward the same standards. They look at test results together and use these results to determine which students need more help. Then they work with colleagues to discuss how to provide that help. These frequent assessments are particularly important for English language learners and for students reading below grade level.

Many worry that these approaches are taking the creativity out of teaching. It appears that teachers in these schools focus their creativity less on *what* to teach and more on *how*. Teachers in these schools often report feeling not less, but rather more like professionals, because for the first time in their lives they are part of a professional community that is working together toward success.

### 2. Find and adopt “best practices”

Traditionally, teachers work in isolation, unaware of the successes or failures of their peers. But in schools getting the best results, neither teachers nor administrators waste time reinventing the wheel. They use the internet to find standards-aligned curriculum and assessments. Sites like Just for the Kids-California make it easy for educators to find schools getting better results with similar populations and challenges. Then they call or visit those schools to learn what teachers there are doing.

But the search for best practices doesn't stop at the classroom door: One of the key findings of the California Best Practices Study is that meeting the needs of the lowest performing groups of students requires not just classroom-level changes,

but also school-and district office-level strategies, programs, and interventions. This finding reveals that the definition of “best practices”—which traditionally meant classroom-level practices or programs—needs to be dramatically expanded to include every aspect of administration, teaching, and testing. Discovering best practices makes it possible to increase effectiveness, and the children benefit.

### 3. Invest in improvement

“Just do it” may work in sports, but improving schools requires more than just asking teachers to try harder. Of course, teachers and administrators in both average-performing and high-performing sites do work hard—but they work hard on different things. They also spend their limited resources, including scarce time, money and energy, differently. The high-performing, high-poverty schools invest in providing teachers with access to new ideas and time to collaborate with peers to implement them. They hire coaches to help teachers teach and administrators lead; and their school districts invest in data systems that provide test scores and other information to teachers almost immediately. Some argue that these investments are “too far from the classroom.” In fact they are essential to long-term success.

## Conclusion

The private sector has repeatedly demonstrated the power of “benchmarking”— identifying and investigating the highest performers and using their ideas to fuel improvement. Consistent, standards-aligned tests now make this approach possible in education. Using test data this way may turn out to be every bit as important as using it to motivate people.

What we find when we begin this benchmarking process is not silver bullets or a few effective programs, but strategies that take hard, careful work. Yet what is most encouraging is that we are discovering not theories, but strategies that actually work to improve our schools, and we are finding them right here in our own backyards.