

How our Schools are Measuring Up

By John Yochelson

Published in the San Diego Union-Tribune
July 29, 2005

The new superintendent of San Diego Unified School District knows what it takes to succeed in today's unforgiving K-12 environment. His tenure will not be judged on his winning personal style, but on the results of yearly student achievement tests mandated under federal and state law. The same standard holds for every other educator in our metro area. What matters most is how our schools measure up.

The performance of the 681 schools in San Diego County will be sliced and diced in many ways when the latest scores are released this fall. At the end of the day, however, the core question will be whether the 500,000 students in our K-12 enterprise are gaining the skills to succeed in an intensely competitive global economy.

The picture that emerges from a review of current data is mixed but not encouraging. On the bright side, there is strong evidence that county schools perform well relative to others in California. Nearly two-thirds of our community's schools rank in the 50th percentile or above in statewide comparisons. Although about 15 percent are not making sufficient progress to meet federal No Child Left Behind standards, county schools as a whole are moving in the right direction. But a closer look shows why San Diegans have deep cause for concern. First, when student achievement in California is compared with other states, we come out near the bottom of the pack. A 2005 RAND study notes that California fourth- and eight-graders ranked lowest of the five most populous states in recent national assessments of reading and math skills.

Second, county data show that almost half our students fail the math portion of California's high school exit exam the first time they take it. Starting in 2006, those who cannot pass by their senior year will find themselves on a fast track to a dead-end job without a high school diploma. Third, only 36 percent of San Diego County high school graduates meet the course requirements for admission to the University of California or Cal State systems. We are not creating the depth of talent needed in a high-cost, knowledge-based economy whose capacity to attract outside talent looks more problematic with every increase in local housing prices.

Finally, wide and unacceptable gaps in achievement persist. On average, higher-income Anglo and Asian-American students outscore lower-income African-American, Latino and Native American students by 50 percent on California standardized tests. They also graduate high school and attend college at much higher rates. San Diego cannot allow the fastest-growing segments of our population to lose the skills race.

Spectacular gains in the achievement of low-income, underserved students are being made here on a limited scale. Countywide programs like AVID and charter schools like High Tech High and The Preuss School at UCSD show what can be accomplished. Still, pockets of excellence are only starting points. The bottom line must be significant gains in whole school districts.

Concerned citizens and organizations can do much to help. Here are some concrete action steps that will make a system-wide impact:

Bolster the San Diego County Office of Education. This expert staff holds our \$4 billion K-12 enterprise together by providing support services and leadership upon which all 42 school districts draw. The county office has engineered a joint commitment from every superintendent and school board to eliminate the minority achievement gap in mathematics. This pivotal effort and others need the backing of the entire community.

Support programs that work. San Diegans cannot afford to spend scarce resources to reinvent the wheel in areas where we have solid assets upon which to build. A coming report commissioned by The San Diego Foundation will suggest a range of opportunities to strengthen mathematics and science education based on evidence of effectiveness as part of its strategic initiative on "Understanding San Diego."

Back visionary initiatives. The Sweetwater Compact guarantees admission to San Diego State with financial aid to all students who successfully complete a rigorous college-prep program in a low-performing district of 40,000 students. This is the kind of groundbreaking program that has begun to produce system-wide change. Much remains to be done to ensure its success.

Foster collaboration. Perhaps the greatest threat to our highly fragmented K-12 enterprise is a go-it-alone mindset. If we agree that the challenge is to lift all boats - not just a few - it will take the combined strength of teachers, administrators, school boards, parents, higher education, employers, philanthropists and community groups to succeed.

San Diegans cannot set the bar high for our schools without also setting it high for ourselves. Now is the time to take K-12 community engagement to the next level.

Yochelson is president of Building of Engineering and Science Talent, or BEST, and former president of the Council on Competitiveness. San Diego-based BEST has reported to Congress on the nation's most effective K-12 science and mathematics programs for historically underrepresented groups.