

News Release

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For immediate release

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20 districts and community partners succeed in raising English learner achievement in 2008-09

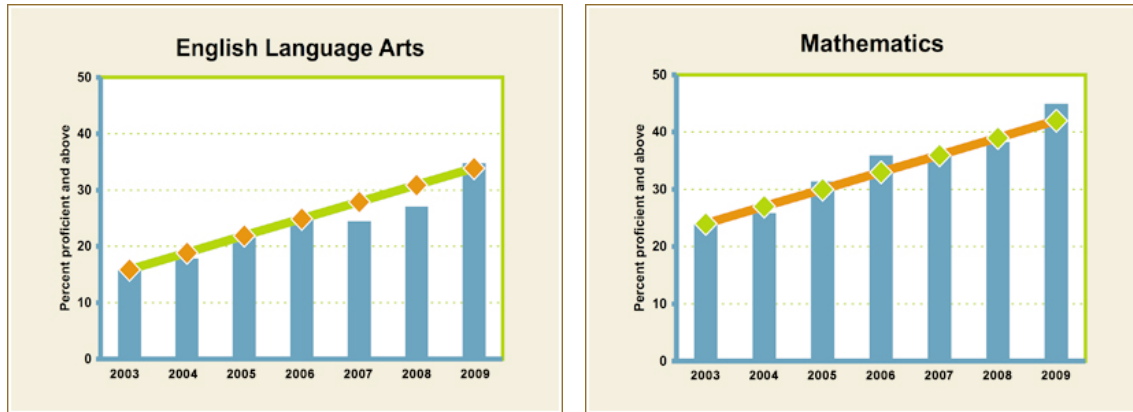
Sonoma County school districts participating in Aiming High, an initiative dedicated to accelerating the academic achievement of English learners, have released new data showing that an increasing number of second-language learners are succeeding in their schools. In 2008-09, these districts increased the percentage of English learners reaching proficiency in language arts by eight points over last year, while proficiency levels in mathematics rose by seven points. These gains are well above the three-point annual goal established by the group and the 4.5-point increase posted by the state in 2008-09.

“The Aiming High districts are to be commended for addressing this challenge head-on and exceeding their goal,” says Sonoma County Office of Education assistant superintendent Don Russell. “It’s gratifying for all of us to see achievement levels increasing for this large subgroup of students.”

English learners now comprise 23 percent of the 71,000 students in Sonoma County public schools and the 20 districts in Aiming High account for two-thirds of this population. Thirty-five percent of the English learners in these districts tested proficient in language arts this year, up from 16 percent in 2003 (the year Aiming High was launched). Proficiency levels also increased in mathematics—45 percent of the districts’ English learners tested proficient in math this year compared to 24 percent in 2003.

The charts below illustrate the annual growth in the Aiming High districts, 2003-09, as compared to the goal of steadily increasing proficiency by three percent annually. The charts are based on the Academic Performance Index (API) statistics released by the state annually.

Growth in English learner proficiency in Aiming High districts, 2003-09



The vertical bars indicate the percentage of English learners testing proficient or above. The diamonds indicate the Aiming High goal, which increases at three percent annually from the 2003 base year.

In examining this data, local educators have found that proficiency levels of English learners in the elementary grades far exceed the consolidated averages indicated on the charts. This is positive news, but it also highlights the complex challenge that second-language learners face in the upper grades, where learning academically rigorous content is much more difficult for students who are not proficient in English.

Sonoma County Superintendent of Schools Carl Wong calls closing the achievement gap “the top education issue of our time.” He references a wide range of achievement indicators and the lagging performance of Latino students, who comprise the vast majority of Sonoma County’s English learner population.

“For years we’ve been saying that our goal is to educate all students, yet when we look at achievement statistics, enrollment in advanced courses, graduation rates, and transition to post-secondary education, we see that many Latino students are not succeeding in our schools. Without question, learning English and core academics at the same time is a challenge, but it is incumbent on us as a community to find ways to ensure that these students get the education they need and deserve. This isn’t just a noble idea. With the growth of the Latino population in our county, it’s key to our economic vitality and community well-being.”

Wong applauds the results of the Aiming High districts, but encourages them to do more. “We’ve seen that increasing proficiency by three percent annually is attainable, but continuing at this modest pace will leave too many English learners behind. Every school district in Sonoma County should join Aiming High, make it a top priority, and set the annual target much higher.”

Participating districts agree that Aiming High has had a significant impact on their schools and the learning that takes place in individual classrooms. In Wright School District,

superintendent Casey D’Angelo says that “Aiming High has kept our focus on the needs of English learners. While we have had success accelerating achievement, Aiming High has pushed us to do more.”

According to Bellevue School District superintendent Tony Roehrick, Aiming High has been “a catalyst to examine instructional practice. The result has been extensive professional development to better prepare teachers to work with English learners. We have expanded our collective skill set and, by doing so, redefined what schooling looks like. The heart of our success is the willingness of our teachers and support staff to use their knowledge of how these students learn and apply it in the classroom every day.”

“I can’t help but think that the work of teachers and administrators in these districts and the efforts of Aiming High have made the difference,” says Don Russell. “Aiming High has raised awareness, brought in additional resources for schools, and engaged agencies and business in this critical effort.”

Russell also notes that the advancement in English learner proficiency did not occur at the expense of other students and that achievement for *all* students has increased countywide. “Our efforts to accelerate learning for English-language learners had no detrimental effects on the student population as a whole,” he says. “In fact, it may have contributed to our overall gains.”

The work of the Aiming High districts is supported by 21 partner agencies—business groups, nonprofits, and other organizations—that are also directing their time, talent, and resources to help boost English learner achievement. This school-community collaboration has allowed Aiming High to address this complex issue from multiple perspectives. Activities under the Aiming High umbrella range from parent education and outreach, after-school tutoring programs, and summer algebra academies to research briefs for teachers, school readiness initiatives, and exploration of best practices for local replication. Teacher training to improve academic content instruction for English learners and advance language proficiency has also been emphasized.

More information about Aiming High is available on the Sonoma County Office of Education website, www.scoe.org.

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Attachment: About Aiming High, with List of Participating Districts and Agencies

About Aiming High

Aiming High was established in 2003 in response to growing evidence of an achievement gap in Sonoma County schools. More English-language learners were enrolling in our schools, but the vast majority were failing academically. Aiming High brought districts together to collaborate with each other and engage community partners in addressing this complex challenge. During the 2008-09 school year, 20 districts and 21 partner agencies participated.

Recognizing that there is not a single approach to closing the achievement gap, Aiming High has instituted a wide variety of activities over the years. The group has focused on increasing the percentage of English learners who score at or above proficient on the California Standards Tests (CSTs) as a measurement of the progress. Their goal is to raise proficiency levels of this student subgroup by at least three percentage points annually.

Some of the initiatives Aiming High districts and community partners have implemented to achieve their goals include:

- Teacher training in instructional strategies that are effective for teaching academic content to students as they are learning English
- Increased emphasis on English language development programs that speed student acquisition of English
- Algebra tutorials, summer algebra academies sponsored by the business community, and after-school math intervention programs
- Kindergarten “jump start” programs and other school readiness initiatives, including preschool-based programs that enhance early literacy and language acquisition
- Parent education and outreach to the Latino community by bilingual educators via a weekly radio show and monthly newspaper articles
- Exploration of best practices for local replication

Participating School Districts, 2008-09

Bellevue Union

Bennett Valley Union

Cloverdale Unified

Cotati-Rohnert Park Unified

Dunham – *joined in 2009-10*

Geyserville Unified – *joined in 2009-10*

Harmony Union

Healdsburg Unified

Oak Grove Union

Old Adobe Union

Petaluma City Elementary

Petaluma Joint Union High

Rincon Valley Union

Roseland

Sebastopol Union
Sonoma Valley Unified
Two Rock Union
Waugh
West Sonoma County Union High
Wilmar Union
Windsor Unified
Wright

Partner Agencies, 2008-09

Arts Council of Sonoma County
California Parenting Institute (CPI)
Community Action Partnership (CAP) of Sonoma County
Community Child Care Council (4Cs) of Sonoma County
Educational Results Partnership
First 5 Sonoma County
La Voz Bilingual Newspaper
Migrant Education
North Bay Leadership Council
North Coast Beginning Teacher Program
River to Coast Children's Services
Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce
Santa Rosa Junior College
Sonoma County Association of School Administrators (SCASA)
Sonoma County Educators Council
Sonoma County Office of Education
Sonoma County Workforce Investment Board
Sonoma State University
United Way of the Wine Country
Volunteer Center of Sonoma County