

SCOPE **Bulletin** AUG 2009

Sonoma County Office of Education



DATA TRENDS

MAKING SENSE OF SONOMA COUNTY'S ENROLLMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT NUMBERS

Student enrollment
in 19 of our 40
school districts
has declined ★

During the past 12 months, a wide range of data on Sonoma County schools has been released. What do the numbers tell us? What issues have they raised for educators and the community at large?

ENROLLMENT: A SMALL INCREASE

In 2008-09, 53 more students attended Sonoma County schools than in the previous year, but this small gain may actually mask a continuing downward trend. One factor contributing to this year's increase is the growth of independent study charter schools, which can enroll out-of-county students. Nearly 1,100 students from neighboring counties are now included in Sonoma County's count due to their enrollment in these programs.

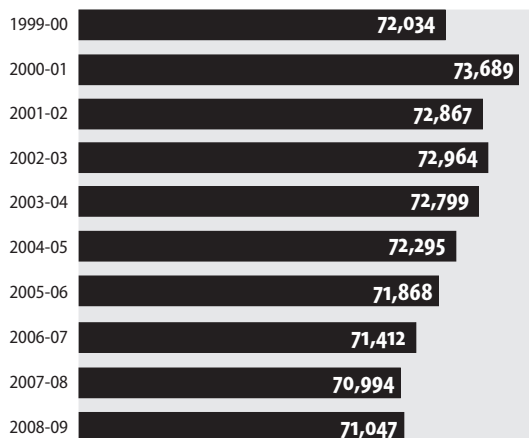
Despite the small rise in countywide enrollment, the student population at 19 of our 40 school districts decreased in size. Because school funding is tied to student attendance, these declines in enrollment are having a significant financial impact on both large and small districts.

SCHOOLS: MORE EDUCATION OPTIONS

There are 179 public schools now providing kindergarten through twelfth-grade education in Sonoma County. A decade ago, there were 154 schools. These counts reflect a similar number of "traditional" schools and expanded options for families that want or need a different education opportunity for their children.

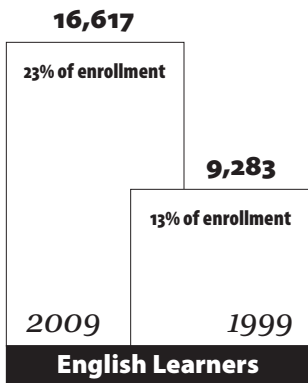
There are 28 locally approved charter schools in our county, compared with just seven a decade ago. Created by groups of

K-12 public school enrollment





Sixty-two percent of the 24,887 Latino students now in our schools are not proficient in English



parents and/or teachers, charter schools are public schools that are exempt from most laws governing school districts. With 7,638 students, these Sonoma County schools now enroll about 11 percent of the school-age population.

There are also 29 alternative schools in Sonoma County, with just under 2,000 students. These schools offer struggling students a smaller learning environment and a variety of support services. Continuation schools, community schools, necessary small schools, and opportunity schools are examples of the alternative programs available.

DISTRICTS: ARE THERE TOO MANY?

The 40 school districts in Sonoma County include 12 single-school elementary districts, each with less than 250 students, and 10 additional districts that enroll under 1,000 students each. Petaluma City Schools and Santa Rosa City Schools operate as combined districts; that is, the elementary and secondary grades are in two different districts with a shared administrative structure.

District consolidation has been a topic of conversation for several years and studies have been conducted to assess the effect that it would have. The key question is whether combining districts would save money and strengthen educational programs—and consensus on that issue has not been reached. No local districts have completed the two-year process to reorganize since the early 1990s, but many districts have formed cost-saving partnerships to share staff or use resources more efficiently.

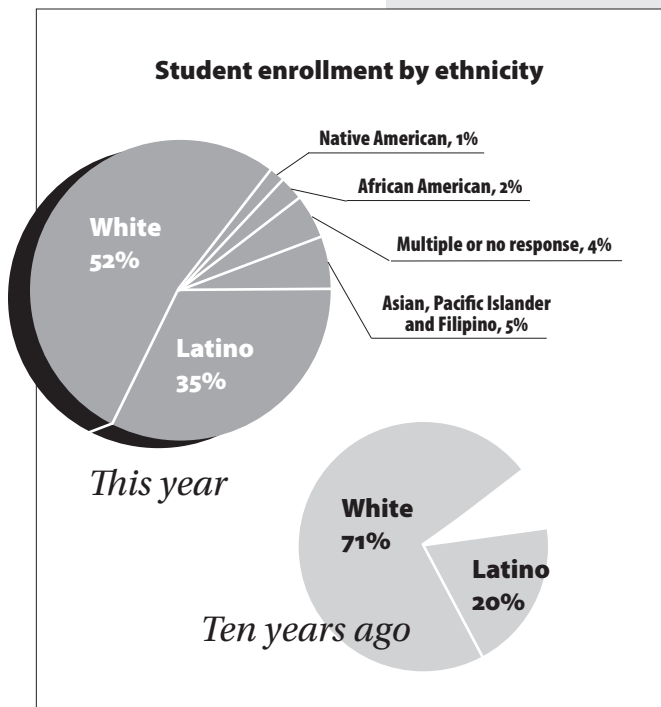
STUDENTS: GREATER DIVERSITY, MORE CHALLENGES

The students in Sonoma County schools are becoming more and more diverse each year. Ten years ago, 70 percent of our students were white. Today, that percentage has dropped to 52, with Latino students now comprising over one-third of the county's enrollment. This shift in student population is expected to continue for some time. Census figures indicate that 23 percent of the county's total population is Latino, as is 35 percent of its school-age population and 45 percent of the children under age five.

With this population shift has come greater language diversity in our schools. A decade ago, 13 percent of students were English-learners, compared to 23 percent today. It is also striking that 62 percent of our 24,887 Latino students are *not* proficient in English.

Learning English and core academics at the same time creates great challenges for these students, so it's very important that they acquire the English skills that will give them full access to the curriculum. Last year, 1,362 students—eight percent of our English learner population—advanced in their language skills to the degree that they were re-designated "English proficient." Unfortunately, our county's re-designation rate is less than that found in many other areas of California. As a result, only ten percent of our youth can be described as meeting English proficiency criteria at school, while speaking a language other than English at home. This is about half of the state average.

One reason for our lower rate may be that, in the past decade, the English-language learner (ELL) population has grown at a significantly faster pace in Sonoma County than in the state as a whole. The number of ELL students here has increased by nearly 80 percent in the last decade, while the state's ELL population peaked in 2003 and is now declining. The percentage of English-language



learners in our county is now approaching the state average (23 percent for the county and 24 percent for the state).

Sonoma County students are diverse in other ways as well, coming from backgrounds of both wealth and poverty. Today, over 26,000 of our students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals, which is one indicator of poverty in our schools. This represents 37 percent of our youth population, compared to 27 percent a decade ago. These students often struggle in school and require supplemental supports to meet academic goals.

HIGH SCHOOL: WHO'S NOT GRADUATING?

Annual attendance records show that public school enrollment peaks in the ninth or tenth grade, then declines each subsequent year. When students in the *Class of 2008* entered high school in 2004, there were 6,181 freshman in the class, but only 5,711 students were still enrolled when they reached their senior year in 2007-08. That's a loss of 470 students, almost eight percent of the entering class.

On average, about three-quarters of the county's ninth-graders actually graduate from high school four years later. While this is slightly higher than the state average, it means roughly one-fourth of our students are not completing high school with their grade-level peers. Some students take extra time to graduate or earn GED certificates, while others drop out or disappear from the system.

There is wide variation in high school completion rates among ethnic groups in Sonoma County. For example, the completion rate for Latino students in the *Class of 2008* was 64 percent, compared to 81 percent for white students and 75 percent on average countywide. Dropout rates also mirror this ethnic imbalance: 27 percent of Latino students dropped out of high school, compared to 13 percent of white students.

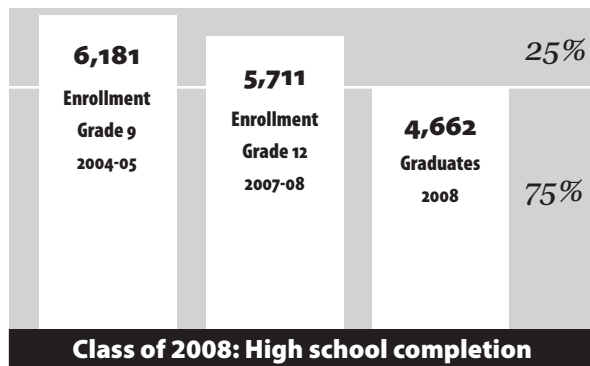
There are also wide gaps among ethnic groups preparing to transition from high school to college. One indicator of college-going rates is the percentage of students who complete the required courses for UC/CSU admission. Just 14 percent of Latino students who graduated in 2008 completed the required courses, compared to 30 percent of white graduates.

ACHIEVEMENT: GROWTH WITH GAPS

On all academic indicators—the STAR tests, high school exit exam, Academic Performance Index (API), and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), to name just a few—Sonoma County has consistently scored above the state average and shown growth over time. But beneath this positive trend lie two key concerns.

The first is the significant achievement gap that exists for English learners, economically disadvantaged students, and Latino students. The academic performance of these student groups is well below county averages (see graph, next page). Some Sonoma County schools are making progress narrowing these gaps—especially in the elementary grades—but achievement disparities are a persistent problem countywide. Sonoma County is not unique in this regard; this is a statewide challenge.

Another issue that's revealed in the achievement data is the slower rate at which Sonoma County is improving when compared to the state as a whole. For example, when the API was first implemented in 1999, the median score



Class of 2008: High school completion

81% of White students completed high school


64% of Latino students completed high school



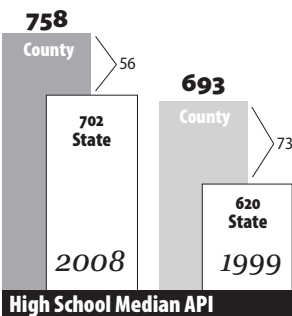
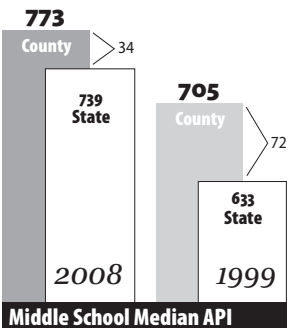
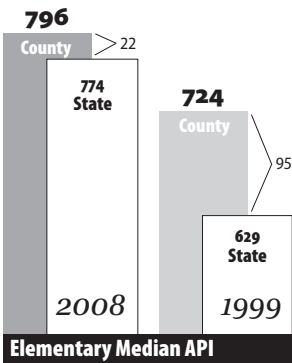
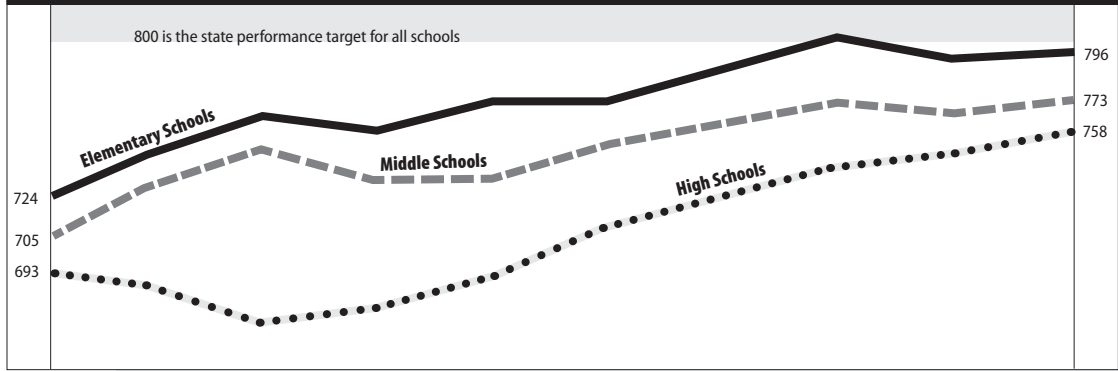
What do the numbers tell us? What issues have they raised for educators and the community at large?

SAT scores, 2008

County	530	CRITICAL READING
State	494	
Nation	497	
County	542	MATHEMATICS
State	513	
Nation	510	
County	529	WRITING
State	493	
Nation	488	

Sonoma County schools have consistently scored above the state average 

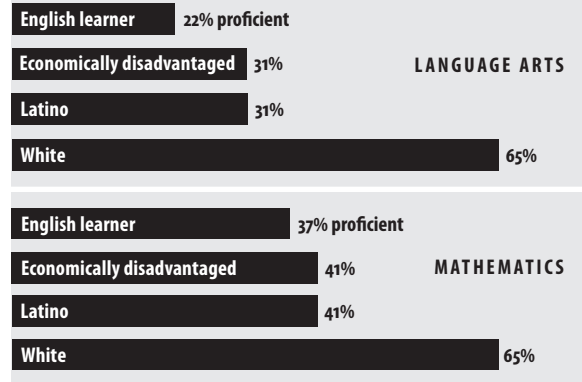
Median Base API scores for Sonoma County, 1999 to 2008



for local elementary schools was 95 points ahead of the state. Today, our elementary schools are just 22 points ahead. The charts at the left tell a similar story for local middle and high schools.

Sonoma County's position on the state's school ranking system also highlights this issue. Fifty-nine percent of the county's schools are in the top half of the statewide ranking system, indicating above-average performance, but this percentage has decreased over time as the state rate of improvement has out-paced the county. And when Sonoma County schools are compared to schools with similar demographic profiles, significantly fewer are rated above average. In this "similar school" ranking system developed by the state, only 35 percent of Sonoma County schools are in the top half of the ranks. This leaves much room for improvement.

Grade 2-6 achievement gaps



DATA TRENDS: NOW WHAT?

In 2008-09, Sonoma County public schools employed over 8,000 people and operated with a budget of nearly \$698 million, making education a major employer and an integral part of the local economy. Schools also have a key role in the county's workforce development efforts, helping to prepare the next generation of citizens to meet the responsibilities that lie ahead.

Current economic conditions in California are adding new challenges to public education and causing many schools to redirect energies and reshuffle priorities. The difficult tasks revealed by this year's data are compounded when staffing levels decrease, class sizes grow, and resources diminish. Yet evidence gathered from across the United States—including studies of schools where students are 90 percent minority, 90 percent low income, and 90 percent achieving at high proficiency levels—shows that academic success is possible for *all* students. ♦



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