The Numbers Show SF Public Schools Moving in the Right Direction

Every August and September public schools, parents and students get the results of tests taken in the spring. These state test results tell part of the story of what students are learning in school. There are other important measures of the district’s progress as well. What follows is a brief summary of some important indicators that the district is moving in the right direction.

More information about these measures can be found at sfusd.edu and cde.gov.

**CST Proficiency**
SFUSD improved on the California Standards Test (CST) for the eighth consecutive year in 2009. Two out of three second through seventh grade students are now proficient or advanced in Math. SFUSD remains the highest performing large urban district in California and the district’s average is higher than the state’s average.

**Academic Performance Index**
The district met its Academic Performance Index (API) targets and improved by five API points to reach a district-wide API of 777, a score that exceeds all other large urban districts in California. An API of 800 is the state standard for excellence. This year approximately half of all schools (46%) have an API score of 800 or above, up from 40 percent in 2008. Over two-thirds of the schools (68% or 71/104 schools) met their school-wide API targets, which is ten more schools than last year. The greatest success was seen at the elementary school level where 77 percent (or 54/70) of the elementary schools met their school-wide API targets.

District to Change School Year Calendar in 2010-11

**Earlier start date, improved semester schedule**
Beginning next fall, students in San Francisco’s public schools will be headed back to class a week earlier than usual.

It’s part of changes to the school year calendar that will take effect for the 2010-2011 school year.

For several months last year, a committee of district officials, labor representatives and community members met to explore several possible new school year calendars, beginning with one issue that is problematic – the winter break that disrupts the fall term.

**Earlier Start, Earlier Finish**
The 2010-2011 school year will begin August 16, 2010, and the year will end before Memorial Day, on May 27. The number of days students are in class (180) will not change. It’s part of changes to the academic calendar that will make the fall term longer and the spring term shorter.

The 2010-2011 school year calendars, begin -

Earl ier start date, improved semester schedule

San Francisco public school students are showing the highest growth in proficiency rates in English Language Arts (ELA) since 2005. As compared to last year, the district has almost tripled its increase in proficiency rates (1.3% growth in 2008 compared to 3.5 percent growth in 2009). In Math (grades 2-7), approximately two-thirds of the students are proficient or advanced (62.2%) and the district improved at a higher rate as compared to last year (1.5% in 2008 compared to 2.9% in 2009).

San Francisco Unified School District
School Times

Students from Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy perform in the school’s annual Winter Peace assembly in December, 2008. This photo was taken by Michael L. Boyd of Maverick Photographers. For eight months, Maverick documented the everyday lives of the students and staff. From left to right: Mia, Rayna, Valentina, James and Iris.

La versión en español se encuentra en las páginas de adentro

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This paper is made possible with the support of The Examiner
Sixth Graders Share First Impressions

Xiisa Bullock, James Denman Middle School
What anxieties did you have before coming to middle school? I had read so many books about middle school and seen movies; the first day the kid always gets lost. She’ll walk into class late and everyone is staring. But actually the first day all my friends got lost. We met in the hallway and were like, “Okay, where are you going?” What’s your favorite subject? My favorite subject is Social Studies. My social studies teacher also teaches Language Arts, which is great because the subjects are so interconnected. We just read this story about claim jumpers who come out West called “The King of Mazy May.” After reading the story, we had to write a postcard as if we were the main character. Are you taking any classes in the arts? I’m taking band and learning to play the drums. I hope my mom doesn’t mind the noise.

Duncan Rocha, James Lick Middle School
What were you most excited about before coming to middle school? I was excited to have locker. In elementary school we didn’t have locker. But now you can drop off all your books, so you don’t have to carry them around to every class. Are you going to participate in extracurricular activities? I’m on the baseball team, and it’s pretty exciting because I get to play with older kids. We’re going to be playing other schools, and my old friends might be on the other teams. What advice would you give to fifth-graders coming to middle school next year? You should get a watch, so you know what time it is and where you have to be. Middle school is different than elementary school because you have more teachers and have to move classrooms. You only have a few minutes between periods.

Deonte Traylor, Everett Middle School
Tell me about your first day of middle school. My first day of middle school I was really excited. I got dressed pretty quickly. When I got there these two boys came up to me and asked me if I wanted to be their friend. I said yes, and we have been friends since. What are you doing in math class? We go to the computer lab to play this game with a monster. You have to type in the multiplication answers before the monster does or else you lose points. The more you do it the more you know multiplication and division. It’s so fun! What’s been your favorite lesson so far? In science class, we did an experiment with vinegar, baking soda and raisins. You mix water with the vinegar and baking soda and then you put the raisins in. Then the raisins’ skin peels off and it gets all bubbly.

Cynthia Garcia, Herbert Hoover Middle School
What electives are you taking? I’m taking dance. At first I didn’t like it. I felt timid. But I’m not that shy anymore. Right now we’re studying jazz dance and I’m learning new moves. Tell me about your teachers. My favorite teacher is Mr. Austin. He teaches science. I like science because you do experiments, and you study the outside world like oceans and volcanoes. Soon we’re going to have a science fair. I might make my own magnet. What’s the most interesting thing you’ve learned about in class so far? In social studies I learned about Stonehenge. That place is incredible! When I saw it, I thought to myself, “Who could have actually built that?” Those are some big blocks.

Hear more from sixth grade students at www.sfusd.edu

Calendar Changes in 2010

Change.
“Our students will benefit from an uninterrupted fall semester and time between the two semesters to adjust their class schedules,” says Superintendent Carlos Garcia.

Mission High teacher Steve Gipson agrees. “This new schedule makes more sense,” he says, “With the fall semester done before the break it will be much easier for kids to stay focused.”

Gipson says he also sees, by May, that his students get a little bit of ‘spring fever’ after standardized testing in late April. “They have a tough time staying focused for finals that are still weeks away.” The new schedule puts spring term finals closer to the testing period mandated by the State.

Summer Childcare Considered

The earlier start of SFUSD’s summer break is a concern for parents who rely on summer programs for childcare and activities. Knowing this is an extremely important issue for families, the committee proposing the changes has kept in touch with public and private organizations – especially San Francisco’s Recreation & Parks department.

When the new calendar was adopted last spring, the district let them know that SFUSD parents would be needing their services a week earlier than usual beginning May 31, 2011, which gave organizations a two-year lead to adjust their schedules.

Better Class Schedules for Struggling Students

The new schedule allows sufficient time for school administrators to make adjustments to class schedules at the middle and high school level.

As it is now, students are scheduled in a year-long block for many core courses such as English and Math and the current one-day break between fall and winter semesters does not allow sufficient time for schools to adjust schedules for students who are failing classes. With the new calendar, schools are more able to offer chances for students who failed the first semester to get back on track in the second semester.

Vacations, Travel

Parent Nancy Gaston Gnass, whose children attend Leonard Flynn elementary, is happy the school schedule is changing. “While I can see that the majority of the improvements affect middle and high school students, I feel that this will benefit everybody in the long run.” Not only is she looking forward to the schedule for her students as they get into middle and high schools, but she sees an immediate benefit right away.

“Early June is a great time to go on vacation with young families – there are cheaper fares and less congestion in general.”

This paper is made possible with the support of The Examiner
Viewpoints

Board of Education
President Kim-Sheree Maufas

The Parent Engagement Initiative, A Restorative Justice Approach, A-G Requirements, language immersion programs, Standard English Learner initiatives, expanded partnerships with Art Museums, and deeper collaborations with Bay Area colleges and universities are all examples of ways that the San Francisco Unified School District is attacking the historically “predictive power of demographics” that have defined the way we educated our students in the past and sent them on an adverse pathway to nowhere.

I applaud the courage of my Board of Education colleagues, our superintendent, and the vision and guidance of our dedicated staff for taking up this call for dramatic change. We have come to recognize that those who are faint of heart or weak of will could not do this work or it would have been done already! (And that was when economic times were somewhat manageable.)

However, we must prepare for unmanageable economic times that will be the most difficult many of us have ever seen - times so stressful that we may fight amongst ourselves for pennies when before we’d thoughtfully discussed how to apply dollars to support the needs of our students and staff.

In my last message to you for 2009, as Board President, I’m asking that all of us think strategically about how we continue to reverse the predictive power of demographics with less dollars and more compassion. Our collective work is setting a standard that can lead this country in the area of education, and I am determined not to shy away from it.

Superintendent
Carlos A. Garcia

We have a lot of promising signs that our schools are heading in the right direction, and we are dedicated to continuous improvement. At the district, we’re looking at ways to support innovation in our classrooms and our district operations to better support the work that schools are doing.

Just because times are tough financially doesn’t mean we should give up on our commitment to innovation; it is the cornerstone of continuous improvement. In fact, innovation can yield more cost effective solutions to problems.

For example, this year we are expanding technology solutions that have up-front costs but which will ultimately contribute to student learning and save the district millions. School Loop, a new electronic parent-to-school communication tool will mean less paper and time will be required to enter grades and attendance; a new point of sale system for our school cafeterias will make collecting reimbursement for free and reduced lunch and/or payments more seamless; and the installation of new cable to allow wide area networks will eventually mean that schools can more easily use online resources for teaching and learning, saving money on other instructional materials.

But technology isn’t the only way we are supporting innovation. At our school sites we are encouraging teachers and administrators to convene in small, structured study groups to conduct evidence-based inquiry. For example, a group of fourth grade teachers may meet to discuss what does this student’s work tell us about what he or she learned? Then these teachers may cross-pollinate ways to improve the lesson or suggest strategies to specifically give additional help to the student. These “professional learning communities,” when done well, are at the heart of our most important innovation – classroom practice that is engaging and joyful and yields high academic achievement.

From Symptoms to Root Causes:
How School Communities are Changing the Conversation

As SFUSD enters the second year of its strategic plan implementation, district leaders will be encouraging school communities to reexamine some of the problems our schools face and discuss whether or not traditional responses have overlooked the origins of those challenges, while mainly treating their symptoms.

Dongshil Kim, SFUSD’s Senior Executive Director of Professional Learning and Leadership for Equity, shares more about a new framework for discussions taking place in our schools.

When you have a headache, what do you do? You might take some aspirin or some other kind of medicine. But what will you do when the headache comes back again and again? Aspirin might help alleviate the pain for a temporary moment, but it has not helped to address the root cause of why you continue to suffer from headaches.

The way we have been going about solving the problems in our schools has sometimes followed the same prescription we’ve taken for curing our headaches. We find immediate fixes for some of our problems – like suspending students for disrespectful or defiant behavior in school – and while we might enjoy some temporary relief, the problem has not gone away by simply excluding students from school for a few days.

One of the resources leaders will use to frame their conversations is an article called “Changing Discourse, Changing Schools” by Eugene Eubanks, Ralph Parish and Dianne Smith. When school conversations revolve around symptoms rather than root causes, the authors use the term “Discourse I.”

These kinds of conversations, they suggest, keep existing school practices and outcomes the same. They argue that schools have often accepted and promoted the use of a dominant set of values, norms, and beliefs. Since these are the same values, norms, and beliefs of many of the leaders and decision-makers, schools seldom question whether these exact things might actually be causing the problems in classrooms.

Let’s return to the example of how we use student suspensions as a solution to improving student behavior to test this idea.

Before getting to the point of suspension, the student is found being disrespectful in the classroom. He (this is likely be a male student) has repeatedly spoken out of turn. Discourse I would have us blaming the student for his behavior.

The alternative, what the authors call “Discourse II,” would have us looking for the root cause of the disrespectful behavior. Why is the student talking out of turn? Is he being willful by choosing to talk at the wrong times? Or could it be that the pattern of conversation he has grown up with in his home and community is different from what is expected in schools?

Turn-taking in conversations varies by culture. We don’t all engage in conversations the same way. In some cultures, the order of speakers is determined by who can command the attention of others. If someone can “jump in” while another is talking and better command the attention of the audience, that is considered valid.

Taking a Discourse II approach to solving our problems will mean asking ourselves if our school practices might be alien
Parent Satisfaction Surveys
In 2009, 12,779 parents responded to a survey sent out by the district. Of the parents who responded, 85 percent feel their child’s school offers a wide variety of high-quality courses and activities during the school day to foster joyful learning. And 92 percent believe their child’s school provides a caring, inclusive, and engaging environment for learning. Ninety-one percent of parents would recommend their school to other parents.

Advanced Placement Exams
The number of SFUSD students taking Advanced Placement Exams has increased every year since 2000. In 2009, there was a 20 percent leap in the overall number of students who took at least one AP exam. There was also a significant increase in participation among underrepresented students, including a 62 percent increase in Latino test-takers and a 41 percent increase in African-American test-takers.

SAT and PSAT
San Francisco public high school students who took the SAT Reasoning Test in 2008-2009 continued the trend of rising scores overall, achieving a 13-point increase in Critical Reading and a 4-point gain in Math, over the last five years. The number of 10th graders who took Preliminary SAT National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT), went from 27 percent in 2008 to 76 percent in 2009 with the help of the SF Promise, a collaborative program with SF State and the Mayor’s office aimed at supporting students with college access.

Changing the Conversation
Atting our students by automatically labeling their way of doing things as wrong or disrespectful, Discourse II pushes us to look beyond our assumptions and personal values to better understand our students and address more constructively the root causes of classroom challenges before simply applying superficial remedies that don’t serve students optimally.

There are no simple solutions to addressing the root causes of problems in our schools, just as there are no immediate remedies for the deep disparities in achievement among our students. But being serious about helping every child reach his or her potential requires having honest conversations about the effectiveness and biases of traditional approaches and re-thinking problem-solving strategies to improve outcomes for all students.

As the authors Eubanks, Parish and Smith suggest, “Discourse II creates an organizational setting that is continually changing and developing because the members are continually learning.” These are the kinds of schools we are aiming to create.

What’s happening at SFUSD – and how to get involved!
San Francisco schools are dedicated to continuous improvement and new and ongoing initiatives are moving forward all the time both district-wide and at each school site. Here are some of the most recent topics of interest at the district at large and who you can contact to learn more and get involved.

- Developing a district-wide plan for parent & family engagement. Last spring the Board of Education passed a resolution calling for a new parent involvement plan to establish specific goals and objectives for building effective partnerships among families and schools. This fall the district is working with families and community groups to identify current strategies that are working to empower families.

To find out how to participate in developing the district’s plan for parent involvement, contact the SFUSD’s Office of School-Family Partnership, at (415) 241-6185 or email: zacharind@sfusd.edu.

- Redesigning the student assignment system. The district is developing a new system for student assignment, planned to be in place for the 2011-2012 school year. This fall and winter community forums will be held to let people know more about specific proposals, and hear their thoughts on how the new model can improve school assignment at SFUSD. To find out more about the redesign process, go to the Parents page www.sfusd.edu.

To participate in a community conversation about student assignment, contact the Parent Advisory Council to the Board of Education, at (415) 355-2201 or email: pac@sfusd.edu.

Fall-Winter School Calendar

Wednesday, Nov. 11
Veterans’ Day (no school)

November 25-27
Thanksgiving Recess (no school)

December 21-January 1
Winter Break (no school)

Monday, January 18
Martin Luther King Day (no school)

Monday, January 25
Lunar New Year (no school)

Monday, Feb. 15
Presidents’ Day (no school)