

RAND REPORT SHOWS CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS LAG BEHIND OTHER STATES ON ALMOST EVERY OBJECTIVE MEASUREMENT

By RAND Report
Jan 12, 2005, 08:35

News Release

FOR RELEASE

Monday
January 3, 2005

RAND REPORT SHOWS CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS LAG BEHIND OTHER STATES ON ALMOST EVERY OBJECTIVE MEASUREMENT

California's public school system lags behind most of the nation on almost every objective measurement of student achievement, funding, teacher qualifications and school facilities, according to a new RAND Corporation analysis that is the first comprehensive examination of measurable dimensions of the state's education system.

The study issued today chronicles how the state's K-12 school system has fallen from a national leader 30 years ago to its current ranking near the bottom in nearly every objective category. It was funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, which is working to build support for improving California schools.

While the assessment of California schools is generally negative, researchers also note several positive trends, including significant improvement in student math achievement in recent years, and funding increases for school construction and repair.

"A lot of people have expressed concern about the state of K-12 education in California," said [Stephen Carroll](#), a RAND senior economist and lead author of the report. "We found that those concerns are well placed. California schools are lagging behind most other states and these findings suggest policymakers need to make major changes in order to repair the problems. Despite some improvements, the state has a long way to go to reclaim its standing as a national leader in K-12 education."

"This report makes the scope of the California education crisis crystal clear," said Marshall S. Smith, director of the Hewlett Foundation's education program. "We need so much more than short-term Band-Aids — we need long-term solutions that deal with the system's underlying problems. To secure California's future, we need serious school finance reform to ensure that all children have the educational resources to achieve high standards."

California currently spends more than \$50 billion each year to educate about 6 million elementary and secondary students — about 12.8 percent of the nation's school-age population.

RAND researchers examined the status of K-12 education in California across several broad measures, including student academic achievement, teacher qualifications, school facilities and non-educational benchmarks such as teenage pregnancy rates. Among the findings:

- California student achievement on national standardized tests is near the bottom of the 50 states, ranking above only Louisiana and Mississippi. California's low scores cannot be accounted for by a high percentage of minority students, who generally have lower scores because many come from low-income families and sometimes must learn English as a second language. Controlling for students' background, California's scores are the lowest of any state.

- California students have made gains on national achievement tests in both math and reading. In particular, the improvement seen among 4th graders in California in the past seven years has been greater than their peers in other states.
- California has the second highest ratio of students per teacher in the nation, even after a major effort began in 1996 to reduce ratios for K-3 and 9th grade. California K-12 schools have an average of 20.9 students per teacher, compared with a national average of 16.1.
- California school districts' teacher standards are generally lower than in other states. Just 46 percent of school districts in California require teachers to have full standard certification in the subjects they teach, compared with 82 percent nationally.
- The real average annual teacher salary in California during the 2000-2001 school year was about the same as it was in 1969-70, when adjusted for inflation. The adjusted annual average salary of about \$39,000 (in today's dollars) places California last among the five largest states and 32nd nationwide.
- While California spent less per pupil on school facilities than other states during the 1990s, progress has been made in recent years with passage of both state and local bond measures. However, schools in central cities and in rural areas still have a high number of inadequate facilities.

The decline of California's K-12 system has paralleled the shrinking of per pupil financial support for education during the past three decades, according to the RAND report.

The decline began about 30 years ago when the state became the first to implement school finance reform that moved responsibility for school funding from local jurisdictions to the state. The change helped to make spending per pupil more equal across the state. While there is evidence the change narrowed the gap between rich and poor districts, it also contributed to lower spending levels overall.

While California's annual per student spending was about \$400 above the national average in 1969-70, it fell to more than \$600 below the national average in 1999-2000, according to the report. The state ranked 27th in per pupil spending in 2001-2002.

Support for K-12 education as a proportion of the per capita income of Californians has fallen as well. California spent about 4.5 percent of the personal income of state residents on public education in the early and middle 1970s — about the same as the rest of the country. But from the late 1970s through the middle 1990s, California's support lagged about 1.2 percentage points behind the national average, according to the report.

Researchers note that California is among the nation's most ethnically diverse states, with a young population that poses many educational challenges.

California's large immigrant population means the state has an abundance of students learning to speak English and parents who do not speak English. The 2000 Census showed that 5.8 percent of California school-aged children had trouble speaking English, compared with a national average of 2.5 percent. This creates challenges for the state's schools by imposing the need for higher staffing, and by hampering communication between schools and parents.

In addition to academic issues, Carroll and his colleagues also examined others measures of youth achievement, such as teenage pregnancy trends, that can be influenced by schools. The findings on these measures were mixed for California's students.

The pregnancy rate for 15-17 year olds in California is higher than in any state other than the District of Columbia, although it is falling faster in California than anywhere else. In contrast, California youths have relatively low use of cigarettes and alcohol when compared with youths nationally.

The analysis includes information about California's academic standing primarily among students in grades K-8 because too little information is available to make meaningful comparisons for students in high school, according to researchers.

Other authors of the RAND report are Cathy Krop, Jeremy Arkes, Peter Morrison and Ann Flanagan, all of RAND.

[RAND Education](#) conducts research and analysis on a variety of topics, including school reform, educational assessment and accountability, and trends among teachers and teacher training.

A printed copy of "California's K-12 Public Schools: How Are They Doing?" (ISBN: 0-8330-3716-1) can be ordered from RAND's Distribution Services (order@rand.org or call toll-free 877-584-8642).

About the RAND Corporation

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world.

Learn More