

REGION: Local schools continue to beat state averages

By STACY BRANDT - sbrandt@nctimes.com | Posted: Thursday, May 13, 2010 9:45 pm



Ryan Barrameda, right, and Saul Aguirre study in Jennifer Eckle's seventh-grade math class at Vista Magnet Middle School on Thursday. (Photo by Jamie Scott Lytle - Staff photographer)

More than half of the schools in North County ranked above average when compared with 100 similar schools across California, according to a state report released Thursday.

Still, the roughly 55 percent of local schools that ranked above average is a substantial step down when compared with the last several years, when two-thirds of North County campuses rated better than their peers.

When compared with all California campuses, two-thirds of North County campuses ranked above average.

The rankings, released Thursday by the California Department of Education, are

part of an accountability system that measures and rewards schools based on test scores. The system is based on a complex formula of

numbers and scores.

In simple terms, the state assigns every school in each district a three-digit score called an Academic Performance Index. The index is based on scores from two standardized tests taken last spring. The higher a school's test scores, the higher its performance index score.

Based on that index, the state gives each school two rankings, an overall statewide ranking that compares each school to all others in California, and a "similar schools" ranking that shows how each school stacks up to other schools with similar characteristics, such as poverty rates and ethnic breakdowns.

To come up with the overall statewide ranking, the department of education breaks the state's 8,000 schools into 10 groups based on each school's performance index score. A school in the bottom 10 percent of the index scores receives a ranking of 1; a school in the bottom 20 percent receives a ranking of 2, and so on. A school in the top 10 percent of the scores receives a ranking of 10.

Across North County, the similar-schools rankings vary wildly from district to district. In San Marcos Unified School District, 15 of 17 schools ---- or 88 percent ---- performed better than most of the campuses the state compared them with.

On the other end was Escondido Union School District, where only 6 of 24 schools ---- or 25 percent ---- were ranked above average.

Some one- and two-school districts had all of their campuses ranked above the state average for similar schools, including Bonsall Union, Cardiff Union, Fallbrook Union High School, San Pasqual Union and Vallecitos Union.

Often, principals will use the similar-schools ranks to find schools with similar demographics that have higher scores than theirs and try to figure out why, said John Roach, superintendent at Carlsbad Unified School District. Sometimes they'll even visit the schools to check out their programs, he said.

"I'd imagine it's a lot like an athletic coach watching tapes of last week's game," Roach said.

Some educators have said the rankings can be disheartening because a school can improve greatly ---- or have scores in the higher tiers of the statewide comparison ---- and still end up with a low similar-schools ranking.

"Even if every school in the state had a score of 800 (the state's target), there would still be the same amount of schools in decile 1," said Sally Bennett-Schmidt, assessment coordinator for the San Diego County Office of Education.

And though the numbers can be useful, they can also change from year to year based on what other campuses the schools are compared with, Bennett-Schmidt said.

When compared with all schools across the state, schools in wealthier areas such as Poway, Carlsbad and Encinitas continue to excel, while poorer areas such as Escondido and Vista continue to struggle.

Only five local schools got perfect 10s in both rankings: Ada Harris Elementary and Cardiff Elementary in Cardiff Unified, Los Penasquitos Elementary and Sundance Elementary in Poway Unified, and **Vista Magnet Middle School in Vista Unified.**

Two Escondido elementary schools ---- Felicita Elementary and Rose Elementary ---- got the lowest score in both ranking systems.

Both ways to compare schools are "of vital importance to parents, teachers, education advocates and the business community," state Superintendent Jack O'Connell said in a prepared statement.

In the Escondido Union School District, where most schools were ranked five or below in either the state and similar-school comparison, Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services Brenda Jones saw encouraging news in the report, especially at the district's middle schools.

"I think there's some very significant highlights in terms of the progress," she said, "but there's always room for improvement at our schools."

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