

# Public schools see paradox of lower funding, higher test scores

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It's a trend that would seem to defy conventional wisdom: As public school spending has declined in California in recent years, student achievement test scores have gone up.

Statewide, school districts spent 6 percent less from 2008 to 2010, but the percentage of second- to seventh-grade students scoring proficient on the state's standardized English test rose from 48 percent to 55 percent.

In the Sacramento region, the same held true. School districts in the four-county region cut annual spending by about \$120 million, or 4.4 percent, from 2008 to 2010, hampered by the lousy economy and state funding cuts. That translates to a 1 percent cut per student. But during that same period, their state achievement test scores improved – a lot.

The percentage of area second- through seventh-graders, for instance, scoring proficient or advanced in English jumped from 53 percent to 59 percent, while the portion scoring proficient or above in math went from 57 percent to 62 percent.

So, are educators finding ways to do more with less? Has student learning been largely unaffected by the spending cuts? The reviews are mixed.

Assemblyman Don Wagner, an Irvine Republican who sits on the Assembly Education Committee, said the findings underscore the tenuous connection between public education spending and student learning.

Overall, spending on public schools has risen over the last two decades, Wagner said, but "you haven't seen a correlation to quality."

David Kline, a spokesman for the California Taxpayers Association, echoed that sentiment, saying many school districts have operated inefficiently, particularly when it comes to spending on administration.

"This is a win, win for the state," Kline said. "The test score improvement would indicate that students are doing better, which is the most important thing for all of us. If, at the same time, taxpayers have to take less money out of their family budgets, this is good for the taxpayers and the economy."

Sacramento County schools Superintendent David Gordon offers a sharply different

perspective. State achievement tests, he said, measure only selected skills, and the scores don't necessarily reflect the toll spending cuts have taken on the classroom.

He noted that while state test scores are rising, California students do relatively poorly on national standardized tests. In recent years, California has consistently scored below the U.S. average on major categories of the national exams.

"It's something that we're second to last in science, just behind Mississippi, based on NAEP (the National Assessment of Educational Progress)," Gordon said. "We're not teaching writing much anymore, or history, social science and physics."

Instead, he said, teachers increasingly have focused their lessons on the "relatively narrow measures" they are held accountable for on the state achievement tests.

The spending cuts have had other, tangible effects on school classrooms, Gordon said. The years of layoffs and funding uncertainty have lowered employee morale, he said, and the larger class sizes make it harder for teachers to reach individual kids or to offer a comprehensive curriculum.

Michael Kirst, the Stanford education professor who is currently president of the state Board of Education, agreed that state test scores don't tell the whole story.

"We're seeing these huge class-size increases in a short period of time," Kirst said. "This has been entirely unanalyzed and undiscussed. We're plunging into the unknown."

Kirst said schools haven't yet experienced the full brunt of state spending cuts. California cut funding to K-12 schools by 14 percent between 2008 and 2010, according to data from EdSource, a nonprofit research group. School districts were able to soften the impact by spending down reserves and taking advantage of one-time federal stimulus money.

"This is the first year – 2011-12 – where most of the federal money is out of the system and most have drained their reserves," Kirst said.

Students only recently took their 2011 state achievement tests, so scores from this year are not yet available.

Natomas Unified in Sacramento County is a good example of a district that so far has been able to improve its test scores despite funding cuts.

The district – facing bankruptcy and a possible state takeover – saw general fund expenditures drop 5 percent, or \$3.7 million, from 2008 to 2010. During the same period, the proportion of second- through seventh-graders who tested proficient in English increased from 45 percent to 52 percent; those testing proficient in math rose from 48 percent to 54 percent.

In El Dorado County, spending fell 9 percent from 2008 to 2010. But test scores rose dramatically. The proportion of students in grades two through seven testing proficient or above in English rose from 63 percent to 68 percent; those at or above proficient in math shot from 65 percent to 72 percent.

El Dorado County Superintendent Vicki Barber attributes this to years of teacher training and

standards-based instruction.

"Whether or not this is sustainable, I think, is really the issue," Barber said. "We aren't able to do the same amount of professional development ... as we did previously. Will we see the result of the lack of funding in the future? In all likelihood we will, in terms of student achievement."

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