

## REGION: More North County schools placed on state improvement list

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While scores on standardized tests continue to rise locally and throughout the state, more North County schools are being identified as in need of improvement after failing to meet increasingly difficult federal proficiency goals.

Students in most North County school districts scored above the state average on tests compiled in the Academic Performance Index, or API, according to data released Wednesday by the state Department of Education.

The API is the state's equivalent of the federal Adequate Yearly Progress report, which determines whether students are at or above proficiency rates set by the national No Child Left Behind formula.

The scores are calculated from math and English tests given to students in grades two through 11 each spring. No Child Left Behind's goal is to reach 100 percent proficiency by 2014, and the proficiency goal rises each year.

This year's goal is a 66 percent proficiency rate, an 11 percent increase from last year.

The API formula ranges from 200 to 1,000, and this year's target was 800.

Schools that fail to reach the target two years in a row are placed on a program improvement list, and schools on the list for five years may face sanctions, such as allowing students to transfer to other schools. Districts also may be told to restructure such schools and replace the principals.

In North County, 66 out of about 240 schools are on the program improvement list, including 21 for the first time.

Many educators have complained that the increasingly high proficiency goals are unrealistic, leading schools to be placed on program improvement lists despite having annual improvements and scores above the state average.

"That points out the conflict between the federal accountability program and the state accountability program," said Jim Esterbrooks, spokesman for the county Office of Education. "And it is a serious problem."

Schools new to the list are: Norm Sullivan Middle in the Bonsall Union School District; Calavera Hills Elementary, Jefferson Elementary and Valley Middle in Carlsbad Unified; Capri Elementary in Encinitas Union; San Pasqual High in Escondido Union High; Fallbrook Street Elementary, La Paloma Elementary and William Frazier Elementary in Fallbrook Union Elementary; Christa McAuliffe Elementary, San Luis Rey Elementary and Ocean Shores High School in Oceanside Unified; San Pasqual Elementary in San Pasqual Union; Valley Elementary in Poway Unified; Oak Crest Middle in San Dieguito Union High; Alvin Dunn Elementary, Joli Ann Leichtag Elementary and San Marcos Elementary in San Marcos Unified; Vallecitos Elementary in Vallecitos; Valley Center Primary in Valley Center-Pauma Unified; and Vista Magnet Middle School of Technology in Vista Unified.

Palmquist Elementary in Oceanside was on the list in 2010 but is off the list this year because of improved test scores.

Schools that do not take Title 1 money, federal funds for poor children, are exempt from the program improvement list.

About 70 schools missed the target but were not on the list because they do not take Title 1 money or had only missed the goal for one year.

Even traditionally high-performing districts have schools in program improvement. Last year, three schools in Poway Unified failed to meet goals for the first time, and six Poway schools fell short this year, with one landing on the improvement list for the first time.

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson held a press conference Wednesday at Oak Ridge Elementary School in Sacramento to announce the data and reiterate that the system needs improvement.

"We need to let Washington know that they need to turn the control of public education back to the state and stop this nonsense of providing mandates that are unfunded," he said.

Torlakson wrote to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan last week requesting immediate relief from No Child Left Behind policies, which he called a failed "one size fits all" approach.

The superintendent also noted that while 6,157 state schools are on program improvement this year, a record 49 percent of all schools met or exceeded the state's API target.

The two-school Cardiff Elementary District had the highest score in North County with 927, a four-point drop from last year.

Oceanside Unified had the greatest number of schools identified as needing program improvement in North County, with 17 out of 25 OUSD schools on the list.

In Vista Unified, 13 out of 34 schools are on the program improvement list.

In Escondido Union, nine out of the district's 23 schools are on the list, including five that have been on at least five years.

Two of Escondido's high schools, Orange Glen and San Pasqual, also are on the list.

In Fallbrook Union Elementary, five of the district's nine schools are on the improvement list.

Despite the many schools on program improvement, the average statewide test scores continue to rise. This year saw an 11 percent increase as average test scores rose from 767 to 778 points. Scores had increased 13 points last year.

In North County, only Escondido Union, Escondido Union High and Fallbrook Union High districts were below the state average.

Fallbrook Union High School District's score of 740 was the lowest in North County and a six-point drop from last year.

While below the state average, both Escondido districts' scores had improved since last year.

Escondido Union's score of 751 was a 16-point increase from last year, and 14 of the elementary district's schools had double-digit increases. L.R. Green Elementary had the highest jump, increasing by 36 points to reach 886.

Escondido's high school district had a 12-point increase to bring its average score to 738. Escondido High School's score of 747 was the lowest of the traditional high schools in the district, but was a 20-point jump from last year.

Carlsbad Unified's average score was 867, an eight-point increase from last year, and Vista Unified School District's average score was 793, a seven-point increase.

Bonsall Union had the biggest improvement of any North County district, jumping 24 points to 877. Bonsall Elementary increased by 29 to reach 896 and Bonsall West Elementary increased by 39 to reach 922. After doubling its score over the past decade, however, Vivian Banks Charter slipped 32 points to drop to 768.

Bonsall's Norm Sullivan Middle School has been placed on program improvement despite a 20-point increase and a score of 851. The classification was a surprise to Bonsall Superintendent Justin Cunningham.

"I'm going to have to give them a call," he said Wednesday. "It's not making a lot of sense to me."

Sally Bennett-Schmidt, assessment coordinator for the San Diego County Office of Education, said there was no mistake.

"A school can have 20 or 30 criteria to meet, and if you miss any one of those two years in a row, you're subject to program improvement," she said.

In Bonsall's case, students in different subcategories had missed the target two years in a row, she said. Cunningham said he thought program improvement was implemented only if students in the same subcategory missed a target two years in a row.

The confusion underscores one of the other complaints about the No Child Left Behind formula, Esterbrooks said.

"It's just preposterously confusing to parents, many teachers and many administrators," he said.