

Sanger, Clovis districts get high marks on education report

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Pinedale Elementary teacher Mai Yia Moua helps sixth-grader Elijah Ortiz with a reading comprehension assignment during class on Thursday, April 24, 2014. HANNAH FURFARO — Fresno Bee Staff Photo | [Buy Photo](#)

The Sanger Unified School District is again proving it's an education leader in the Valley in a new statewide list that measures graduation rates and performance of low-income and minority students.

Sanger Unified joins Clovis Unified -- which has ranked in either second or third place since 2010 -- as one of the top 10 districts across California in the [fourth annual study](#) from The Education Trust-West, an Oakland-based nonprofit.

The report looks at academic performance, graduation rates, the achievement gap among racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups, and district improvement over time at more than 140 districts. California districts generally performed poorly on the review, with most receiving either a C or D grade. Of the nine districts surveyed in the central San Joaquin Valley, including Fresno, Central, Madera and Visalia unifications, seven received a C or a D.

Fresno Unified's D is indicative of the wide achievement gap between students of color and white students, and the lack of progress by at-risk students.

"We'd certainly like to see us with a higher grade or higher ranking and that's something we're shooting for," said Dave Calhoun, Fresno Unified executive director of research, evaluation and assessment. District officials said new summer school test preparation classes and the transition to a new set of math and English standards under Common Core could help close some of those gaps.

Sanger Unified got a B- grade and tied in the statewide list for seventh place with five Southern California districts. Clovis Unified tied with three districts -- Baldwin Park, Bonita and Claremont unifications -- for third place with a B grade. Palos Verdes Peninsula and Rocklin unifications tied for first place.

It's the first time Sanger has made the top 10 list. The district also ranked highly for minority student graduation rates -- a ranking it has achieved in previous years -- with 95% completion among black and Latino students.

It's been a long climb to the top for the district: 10 years ago, its students performed in the bottom 2% of districts on the state's annual yardstick of school performance, the Academic Performance Index. Black and Latino students scored far below the state's minimum requirements back then.

Sanger turnaround

But those scores -- which ranged from 200 to 1,000 -- have since catapulted from the low 620s in 2004 to well over 800 in 2013. How'd they do it? A study by two Stanford University researchers that investigates the reversal credits a cultural change: instead of investing in the newest education trend, the district did long-term planning and experimented with and adapted long-used methods. Instead of blaming teachers for poor scores, the study says, the district worked to improve respect of faculty by students as well as other school staff.

Sanger's continued success isn't surprising to Jane David, one of the lead researchers and director of the Bay Area Research Group.

"You can probably tell from what we predict (in the study) that Sanger would continue to improve," she said.

The district's proximity to urban amenities and its consistent leadership help explain why Sanger has made so much improvement, she said.

In a district of just under 11,000, Sanger schoolchildren look a lot like students in some of the smallest and most rural districts across Fresno County. More than 80% of Sanger students are nonwhite. About 76% come from low-income homes and almost 30% of their parents didn't graduate from high school.

There's a palpable sense of relief in the district, where marked success shows even students from such hardscrabble roots can make a turnaround.

"You can't say there's any one thing," that made the change, said district Superintendent Matthew Navo. "Everything from after-school programs, to the adult school that allows students to make up credit, it really ties together in one system."

Clovis stays in top 10

This year marks the fourth in a row that Clovis Unified has made the top 10 list: Students of color continue to graduate at high rates and are steadily improving on statewide tests, the study shows.

In Pinedale Elementary teacher Mai Yia Moua's classroom, 11-year-old Elijah Ortiz read through the passage on his assignment sheet several times to identify the main idea.

"Do you have a subject, do you have a verb?" Moua called out to her students as they pored over the assignment and quickly jotted down their answers.

"The main idea is about how dogs help out people," Elijah wrote on his makeshift dry-erase board, a bright yellow sheet of paper fitted inside a clear plastic sleeve.

Moua's reading intervention class is one of several at Pinedale designed to help youngsters falling behind in reading and writing catch up to their peers.

It's classes like these, said former principal Allison Hernandez, that have helped the school's Academic Performance Index scores soar from 683 in 2004 to 875 in 2013.

"You can see where we were and where we are now in English language arts," she said. "We've essentially closed the achievement gap. We've had year after year of just tremendous growth."

Almost 95% of the school's 481 schoolchildren qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. That's not the norm among Clovis schools -- about 35% of the students are low-income, compared to about 84% at Fresno Unified.

But Clovis is a big city, said Jeannette LaFors, director of equity initiatives at The Education Trust-West, and 35% still equates to a lot of low-income and minority students.

"Quite frankly, they don't have the same percentage of high-need student population as many of the other districts we have featured before, but it's still a considerable population," she said. "Clovis was a standout for us because they for all four years were on the top 10."

District	Overall grade	College eligibility*	Latino/white achievement gap
Central	C	D	C
Clovis	B	B	B
Fresno	D	D	D
Kings Canyon	C+	D	C
Los Banos	C-	D	C
Madera	D	F	C
Sanger	B-	B	C
Visalia	C	D	C

*Information based on graduation rates of students of color, rates of students eligible to attend UC/CSU
Source: The Education Trust-West

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