



Open Letter to the Education Community in Los Angeles

What all families want is a quality public education for their children. LAUSD is still far from meeting this goal, but recent data shows signs of progress. Several weeks ago, the California Department of Education released the 2011 API scores, a commonly-used indicator to assess how well groups of students, schools and districts are performing. The API score is based on a combination of student state tests (e.g. reading and math proficiency) taken at different grade levels with 1,000 being a perfect score and 800 being the “target” score set by California. Basically, 800 means most students are performing well, while 1,000 means the school is providing a quality education to ALL children. This year, LAUSD had a district score of 728. This is the 4th year in a row the district recorded double-digit increases averaging 17 points annually; unlike 2005 and 2006 when the gains were a modest 9 points per year.

How do we make sense of this acceleration in light of dramatic funding cuts and teacher/staff lay-offs in recent years? Part of the explanation, I believe, is due to recent reforms targeting low-performing schools that have created urgency, raised expectations, expanded accountability, and fostered innovation. Some of these efforts include: expanding school models that have greater autonomy and more specialized instruction (pilots/charters/small schools), the A-G Resolution, the School Report Card, and the Public School Choice (PSC) resolution, among many others. These reforms sent a clear message that the status quo was not acceptable and that something needed to be done differently to improve school performance at a faster pace.

While the LAUSD average API score seems high (above 700), it hides the fact that a large number of schools in low-income and communities of color are failing. Fortunately, these recent reforms have not only raised performance overall, they have particularly raised achievement at some of the lowest performing schools. Take for example the impact of Public School Choice on the 12 schools first affected by the initiative in 2010. These were schools that had demonstrated little progress for a very long time. For example, in 2009 before the initiative, the 12 schools averaged a *decrease* of 13 API points. The transformation in performance has been dramatic, if not miraculous, since they took part of the PSC initiative. The schools recorded an average growth of 24 API points during 2010 and 2011. What’s even more impressive is that this year, 7 of those schools saw significant increases in the performance of traditionally underperforming student groups such as Latinos and African Americans. These schools are still below 800, but the trend has switched from worsening to now rapidly improving.

The data indicate that the district is heading in the right direction at a faster pace, but a long road still lies ahead towards ensuring that every community has a quality public school -- for all schools to

reach and sustain 1,000 API. How long can we wait for **all** students to have a quality education? If you take the 2005/06 API growth rate of 9 points annually, it would take approximately 30 years for all LAUSD schools to reach the perfect API score. If you take the average API growth rate of 17 points over the last four years, it would take only 16 years. Even better, if you take the average growth rate of 24 API points experienced by some reform schools (PSC), it would only take 12 years. Do we want to wait 30 years when the current trend shows we can get there in less time? Should we tell families to be patient while another two generations of our school-aged children pass through a failing system? The policy decisions taken by the board of education will significantly dictate our pace of progress, this includes their decisions to change current initiatives, implement new ones and most importantly the terms to be included in the new agreement with labor unions.

The same level of urgency, leadership, commitment and courage exhibited by LAUSD Board members in the past few years needs to remain as the standard practice in order to continue our current direction and accelerated pace. The Board needs to learn from the recent reforms and replicate the successful practices system-wide, especially in other low-performing schools. All families need to benefit from the great gains we have experienced in some communities.

To fix our broken educational system, we need deeper reforms, not less. We need reforms that are smart, data-driven, and research-based. As the next stage in this journey, the district should support efforts that ensure all families have access to effective educators/leaders, deepen parental engagement at the school level, and provide parents with more quality educational options.

LAUSD Board members need to carefully analyze and weigh the data to assess the impact of recent reforms. In doing so, only one conclusion can be drawn: these efforts are making a difference and should be scaled up to effectuate broad, systemic change. If Board members disagree with the progress made, it is incumbent upon them to make a public case to the families and communities they serve using data to justify any decision to veer away from these reform strategies. Ultimately, Board members are accountable to the families and students they were elected to serve; and their performance should be evaluated by how well they have helped to increase the performance of schools, particularly those chronically underperforming.

We are at a critical junction in our journey of improving school performance and “we have to do all we can to reach 100 percent graduation,” as reiterated by LAUSD Board President Monica Garcia. Any change from this strategy will significantly threaten the acceleration achieved during the last four years and may set us back to a previous performance level -- the LAUSD API score in 2005 was **649**.

Building upon the gains we have already achieved is the only way to reach our destination sooner -- A quality education for all students!

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