

The ACHIEVEMENT GAP

What will it take to close it?

It's been more than 50 years since the U.S. Supreme Court tried to eliminate inequities in public education. For a time, significant progress was made.

In the 1970s and '80s, the achievement gap between African American and white students narrowed by more than half in reading and close to that in math. But in the 1990s the gap began to widen again. Studies show that the gap in NAEP test scores is now approximately 10 points wider — about a year's worth of learning — than it was 10 years ago.

While there are no similar studies for the progress of Hispanic students over the past three decades, there's no shortage of indicators that the gap exists.

The past school year was the first year



Teachers at Mathson Middle School in San Jose are making a concerted effort to push students to work beyond their comfort levels. The use of incentives has helped improve both the behavior and the academic performance of students, says math teacher Raul De La Selva.

that students had to pass the California High School Exit Exam to receive a diploma. Approximately 91 percent of the state's seniors had passed both sections of the test by July, but a demographic breakdown by the California Department of Education reveals that 97 percent of white students and 95 percent of Asian students passed the test, compared with 86 percent of poor students, 86 percent of Hispanics, 84 percent of African Americans and 76 percent of English language learners.

Similarly, the state's Standardized Testing



and Reporting Program (STAR) indicates that students are showing progress at almost every grade level, and are performing at the highest levels since the program began almost a decade ago. Nevertheless, the achievement gap has either remained the same or widened over the past four years at most grade levels. In English-language arts, African American, Latino and poor students remain at “below basic” or “far below basic” levels at three times the rate of white, Asian and affluent students; and affluent students are twice as likely as low-income students to reach pro-

iciency. In math, white and Asian students are twice as likely to be proficient as Latino and African American fourth-graders; poor students are almost three times as likely to score “below basic” as affluent students.

California’s graduation rate is 87 percent for 2004-05, according to an analysis of California Department of Education statistics. But when the numbers are broken out by ethnic group, a sizable gap is revealed with 90 to 93 percent of Asians, Filipinos and whites graduating compared with 81 to 83 percent of Native Americans, Latinos and

African Americans.

The gap is even more evident when the number of graduates is compared with the number of ninth-graders enrolled four years earlier. The overall graduation rate of 71 percent breaks down to 90 percent for Asians and Filipinos, 79 percent for whites, 70 percent for Pacific Islanders, 64 percent for Native Amer-

STORIES BY
SHERRY POSNICK-GOODWIN

PHOTOS BY SCOTT BUSCHMAN

Mathson defies odds, moves from worst to first

Three years ago Mathson Middle School students were at the bottom of the barrel when it came to both academics and behavior. Staff dealt with such problems as drug dealing, fighting, rampant gang activity, cars vandalized in the staff parking lot, and students getting pregnant and dropping out before high school. The campus was notorious for having the worst test scores among the seven middle schools in the Alum Rock Union Elementary School District in San Jose.

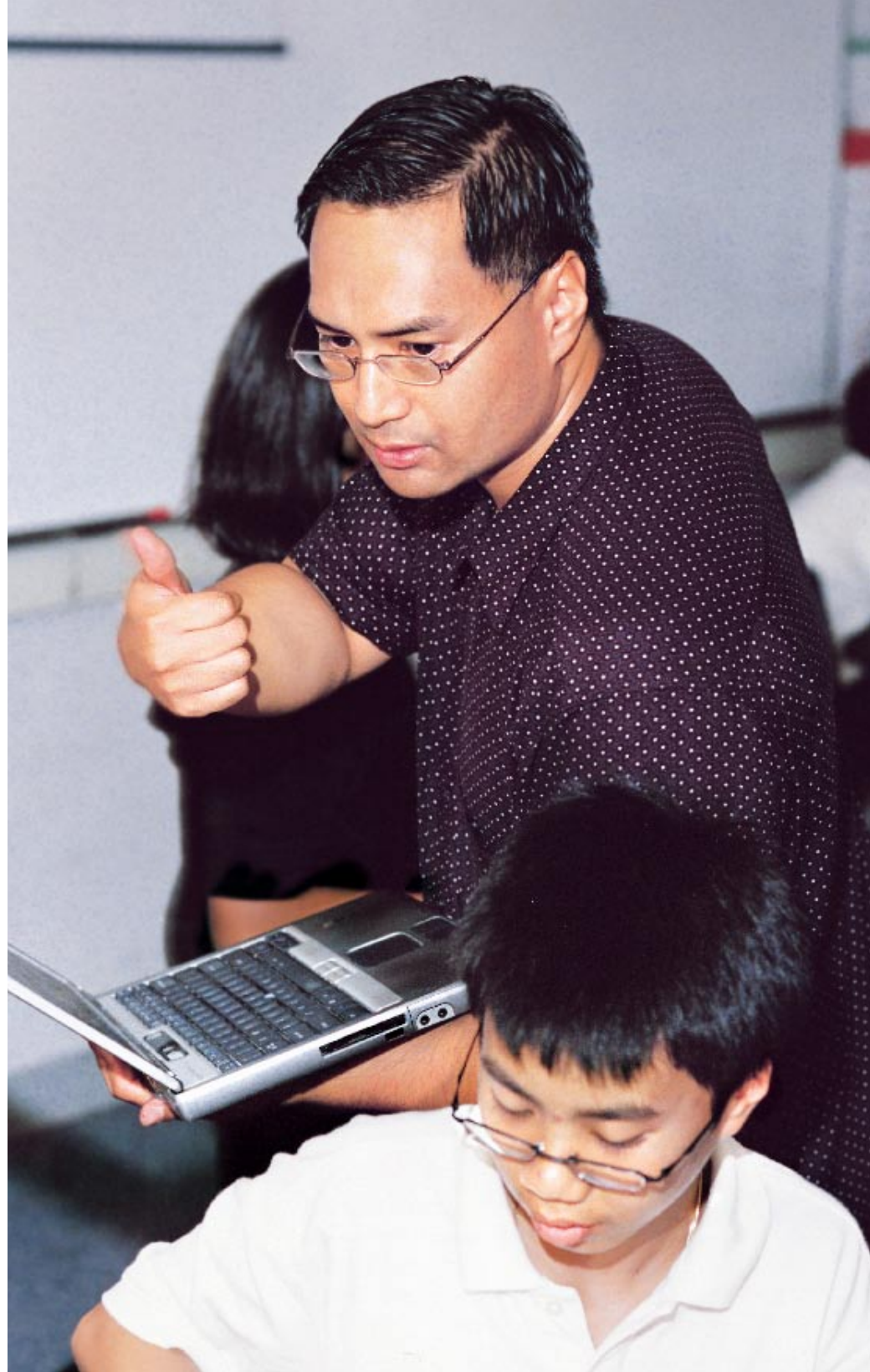
“Students were running the school,” recalls eighth-grade language arts and science teacher Lawrence Gotanco. “Our staff was divided and we had no clear vision of where we needed to be.” Parents were so unhappy with the school that they were successful in their efforts to get the sixth grade eliminated.

But things have changed: Mathson Middle School has gone from worst to first in the district. The school, which had an API score of 546 in 2003, topped in at 710 last year. Forty-four percent of Mathson students (90 percent of whom are Latino) now test proficient or advanced in mathematics. That compares well with the state average for Latinos in seventh- and eighth-grade math. Students are well-behaved and respectful. And this year the sixth grade has returned.

How did this deeply troubled middle school make such a tremendous turnaround?

Alum Rock Education Association (AREA) members unanimously attribute the change to the arrival of Principal Glenn Vander Zee. His leadership, they say, has made all the difference in the world, along with his willingness to work with the teachers union to implement change on many levels.

Following a retreat he scheduled for staff to brainstorm, AREA members agreed to adding an extra period of instruction each school day and operating five-week Saturday sessions in math and English to assist strug-



gling students — in addition to after-school and in-school intervention programs. Mathson was able to pay teachers for the longer school day and intervention programs with federal funds and the final allocation from a state High Priority Schools Grant. Ironically, now that the school is doing well, it may lose funding to continue such programs.

“It came down to our teachers wanting

Mathson Middle School in San Jose has become the kind of school Lawrence Gotanco always wanted to be part of. Here the eighth-grade language arts and science teacher checks homework. In the foreground is Dennis Tran.



this,” recalls special education teacher Jose Gonzalez. “We decided we’d do whatever we had to do to have students succeed. We felt that there wasn’t enough time in the day, and that we needed more time to make gains with our students.”

“Teachers spent a lot of time thinking of ways to get better,” recalls seventh-grade language arts teacher Kilian Betlach. “We didn’t pay a high-priced consultant to tell us how to teach; instead, we talked to each other.”

The school improvement plan called for increased collaboration time for teachers to analyze data on a weekly basis and look at the best ways of meeting the needs of all students. “We shared best practices,” says Betlach. “Every teacher on the site decided they needed to be a better teacher, no matter how good they were. It’s a credit to our staff that they

Jose Gonzalez has special ed students like Oscar Franco Morales and Steven Thoun (facing page) dress up for class once a week. Counselor Adelina Whitecrow helps students figure out what’s under their control.

were able to see that.”

High standards were set for the school’s population of nearly all low-income, Hispanic students, many of them English language learners. Teachers decided they needed to push students to work above their “comfort levels.”

“We decided that student demographics were not destiny,” explains Betlach. “We teach-

ers sometimes accept too little from kids and make decisions about what they can learn before we see what they can do.

“I have seventh-graders who have a typical reading level of second grade. But I expect them to make three year’s growth in a year. That won’t take them to the next grade level, but if the eighth-grade teacher can do the same thing, they will be at grade level when they leave this school.”

“We looked at what we were doing wrong and we didn’t make up a bunch of excuses,” says Jain Shaffer, who teaches seventh- and eighth-grade language arts. “We didn’t look at the factors that were keeping us down. Instead, we looked at key ideas to move us forward. Our philosophy became, ‘We love our kids, but we don’t love them so much that we feel sorry for them or make excuses for them. We love them enough to want them to succeed.’”

The changes weren’t for everybody. Some teachers decided to go elsewhere, says Shaffer. Since then, the once-high teacher turnover rate has become practically zero.

“Our motto was, ‘We said we’d do it. Hold us to it.’”

“It’s that devotion and commitment that is making a difference here,” relates math instructor Raul De La Selva.

As for students, he attributes the use of incentives for improving both their behavior and their academic achievement. Students are rewarded with “Mathson Money” for getting correct answers, good grades and regular attendance, as well as for behaving nicely toward others. “They love it,” says De La Selva. “They can cash in their money for many things, like getting first place in the lunch line, or a ‘free dress’ day when they don’t have to wear a uniform.”

Laurie Manikowski believes that English language learners, who make up 60 percent of the school’s population, have improved since teachers starting making an extra effort to place them by ability level, which is constantly shifting. “Years ago, the newcomers were mixed with the advanced ELL kids,” she recalls. “My little ‘angelitos’ were lost.” The school now operates a newcomer center for the district and works hard to accelerate not only language skills, but social adjustment for recent arrivals.

“We basically want to give them a safe and happy environment. We let them talk about their cultural adjustment and how they feel.



We try to make sure that their emotional needs are being met.”

School counselor Adelina Whitecrow works hard to help meet students’ emotional

needs, and says many students live in challenging circumstances. “Their parents might be working two or three jobs, and there may be multiple families living in a small dwelling. They may have emotional problems and family disruptions. My job as a counselor is to figure out why students may not be at their best in reaching their academic goals.”

Whitecrow is highly visible on campus, working in the cafeteria during brunch and lunch time. “I can see who is having a bad day and ask them to come and see me,” says Whitecrow. “I tell them that not everything may be within their control, but that many things are. I tell them, for example, that it’s within their control to wake up in the morning and not be late for school, and that it’s within their control to have a clean uniform instead of waiting for someone to wash their clothes.”

When students face more serious issues, she often alerts other teachers and tells them, “We need to love this kid on a daily basis.”

Now that Mathson Middle School is a role model for other schools in the district, teachers and students are filled with a sense of

pride. For the first time in years, clubs are flourishing on campus. The Low Rider Bicycle Club recently gave the principal a bike, which he rides around the campus during much of the day monitoring behavior and reminding boys to tuck their shirts in.

“It’s a good thing to be at this school because we are one of the best schools in the district,” says eighth-grader Lupe Perez. “I’m proud of that. I think it’s because we have good teachers and a good principal.”

“The kids wanted someone to set boundaries for them,” says Gotanco. “Mathson is now the kind of place that I wanted to be a part of when I first went into teaching. There is so much potential here, it’s amazing.”

For Shaffer, the “magical moment” of realizing the school had truly changed came when students became excited about wearing honor roll T-shirts on Fridays. “Even guys in baggy pants wanted these T-shirts as a point of honor. The epithet of ‘schoolboy’ or ‘school-girl’ was no longer used by kids in a derogatory fashion. It’s a totally new way of doing business.”