

Students, Teachers, and Schools in California's Central Valley

The Central Valley encompasses over 40 percent of California's geography. It is one of the fastest growing regions in the state, and much of its increasing population consists of school-age children. Twenty percent of California's public-school students attend schools in the Central Valley. Reflecting the racial/ethnic diversity of the Valley, the student population also includes many at-risk youth: One-quarter of children in grades K–5 are English Learner (EL) students who do not speak English or do not speak it well; one-half of all K–12 students participate in a subsidized lunch program.

In *Student and School Indicators for Youth in California's Central Valley*, Anne Danenberg, Christopher Jepsen, and Pedro Cerdán provide a statistical portrait of elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education in the Central Valley. Using data from 1990, 1995, and 2000, the authors examine school resources, course enrollment, and student achievement in the Central Valley's four major regions (North Valley, Sacramento Metro, North San Joaquin, and South San Joaquin), comparing trends over time in these regions to those in the rest of the state (the measure used for comparative purposes in this report). When the data allow, differences across racial/ethnic groups, income categories, and urban/rural areas are also presented.

The authors do not explore policy implications suggested by the statistics, nor do they draw any policy conclusions. Rather, their report is intended to serve as a sourcebook with three specific goals: (1) to help the public better understand the educational circumstances of youth in the Central Valley; (2) to provide information that can be used by decisionmakers to target policy programs; and (3) to present a statistical portrait that will help measure the success of ongoing and future policy efforts to improve the educational well-being of youth in the Central Valley.

Although the indicators used in the report reveal wide variation among its regions, the Central Valley in general is faring worse than the rest of the state along several dimensions, including student socioeconomic status, test scores, college preparation, and four-year college attendance. Selected statistics are presented below.

Student Demographics

More than one million students attend public schools in the Central Valley. Although K–12 enrollment increased throughout the Valley between 1990 and 2000, the most explosive growth occurred in grades 9 through 12, with every region in the Valley experiencing more growth than the rest of the state. Over the decade, the high school student population in the Central Valley grew by 44 percent, compared to 28 percent in the rest of the state.

As is true for the rest of the state, the percentage of white students in the Central Valley declined and the percentage of Hispanic students increased. In 1990, 28 percent of K–12 students in the Central Valley were Hispanic and 56 percent were white. In 2000, the figures were 36 percent and 45 percent, respectively.

As noted above, many of the students in the Central Valley represent vulnerable or disadvantaged populations at risk of poor educational outcomes. In 2000, 20 percent of K–12 students lacked English proficiency and 18 percent were eligible for California's welfare program (CalWORKS). Migrant students—another at-risk population—are youth who are employed (or whose parents are employed) in migratory agricultural or fishing operations. These young people often cross school district and state boundaries several times during a single academic year. In 2000, almost half the state's migrant students could be found in the Central Valley.

Teachers and Counselors

Teacher credentials and experience are two characteristics often associated with teacher quality. With regard to these characteristics, the Central Valley is in a better position than the rest of the state. Students in the Central Valley generally attend schools with fewer uncertified or inexperienced teachers, regardless of student race/ethnicity, the number of students participating in subsidized lunch programs, or whether the school is in an urban or rural community. For example, urban schools in the Central Valley have higher shares of more-qualified teachers than do urban schools outside the

Valley. The data also show that high school students in the Central Valley have slightly more access to guidance counselors than do students in the rest of the state.

Student Performance

Student performance is a core measure of educational success, and the researchers used several indicators to examine this measure, including test scores and high school completion rates. They looked at two tests included in California's Standardized Testing and Reporting System: the Stanford 9 and the California Standards Test. For a number of reasons explained in the report, the researchers focus in particular on non-EL students taking the Stanford 9 in the fifth grade and scoring at the 50th percentile (i.e., half the students nationally score above this percentile, half below it). Students in this group in the Central Valley lagged behind their counterparts in the rest of the state in both reading and math in 2000. Results were similar for the California Standards Test. Again, the researchers focused on non-EL students in selected grade levels that they considered "transition points" (grades 2, 5, 8, and 11). In every one of these grades, the proportion of students in the "below basic" and "far below basic" categories was higher in the Central Valley than in the rest of the state.

The researchers also looked at results for the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Although this test is not mandated by the state, virtually every highly selective four-year college or university in the United States requires prospective students to take the test as part of its application process. Participation rates in every region of the Central Valley were well below those of the rest of the state in all three years (1990, 1995, and 2000). The average score for all regions in 2000 was 977, compared to 989 in the rest of the state.

Without a student-level database that tracks individual students over time, it is difficult for school officials to accurately estimate high school graduation and dropout rates. The researchers used two measures of graduation rates and in both cases found that high school completion rates in the Central Valley are comparable to those in the rest of the state, although rural and high-poverty schools in the Valley have lower graduation rates than their counterparts in the rest of the state.

High School Courses and Enrollment

To be considered by the University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU), high school graduates must have completed a number of college-prep courses (the

"a-g" series) with a grade of "C" or better. Throughout the decade (1990, 1995, and 2000), high school graduates of every race/ethnicity in the Central Valley (Asian, black, Hispanic, white, and "other") had lower completion rates than their counterparts in the rest of the state.

In addition to the a-g series, many high schools offer Advanced Placement (AP) courses that enable students who pass them to skip certain introductory-level college courses. The availability of these courses and enrollment in them arguably signal the presence of the most advanced high school students. Within every Central Valley region, the percentage of students attending schools offering AP subjects was lower than the percentage attending such schools in the rest of the state (with the exception of math classes in the Sacramento Metro area in 2000). In every region, the share of students enrolled in every type of AP course was also lower than in the rest of the state.

College Enrollment and Completion

Throughout the 1990s, the percentages of high school graduates from the Central Valley enrolling in UC and CSU were lower than the corresponding percentages of graduates in the rest of the state enrolling in these four-year colleges. A final measure of educational progress in postsecondary education is college graduation. As was the case in calculating high school graduation rates, the data do not allow precise estimation. In 2000, the UC system had a higher graduation rate than the CSU system. Data that include transfer rates from community colleges show that the percentage of incoming students from the Central Valley who gained a bachelor's degree from UC was lower than the percentage of students who entered the system from schools outside the Valley.

The PPIC Report

This research brief provides an overview of the statistics presented in the report, looking at broad comparisons between the Central Valley and the rest of the state. The report itself focuses more closely on individual regions within the Valley, and its data show a wide range of outcomes, with some regions performing worse and some better than both the Central Valley as a whole and the rest of the state. For example, student achievement in the South San Joaquin area often lags behind other regions, whereas achievement in the Sacramento Metro area often exceeds achievement in other regions in the Central Valley and the rest of the state. The PPIC report is a truly regional study and, as such, should be explored at that level.

This research brief summarizes a report by Anne Danenberg, Christopher Jepsen, and Pedro Cerdán, Student and School Indicators for Youth in California's Central Valley (2002, 100 pp., \$12, ISBN 1-58213-060-4). The report may be ordered by phone at (800) 232-5343 [U.S. mainland] or (415) 291-4400 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas] or through the Internet at www.ppic.org. The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.
