

Which California school districts are run well?



BY DAN WALTERS DECEMBER 13, 2022

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IN SUMMARY

A new on-line tool allows parents and voters to see how well their local school districts are prepared to make the reforms necessary to raise academic achievement in California.

Gov. Gavin Newsom is fond of characterizing his state as a national — or even global — model in all things good, from economic clout to fighting climate change.

One conspicuous absence on his list of California's virtues is its public education system, for good reason.

In statewide and nationwide tests of K-12 academic achievement, California [lags badly behind](#). Learning is especially deficient among children from poor families, but even kids from affluent California families tend to lag behind those in other states.

To the extent that this educational crisis receives any attention in the state Capitol, the discussion is almost always confined to money, on the fanciful notion that spending more will automatically increase academic attainment.

One reason money doesn't solve the problem is that the state provides very little oversight on how the money is spent, including the extra funds that local school systems receive specifically to close the achievement gap. State education officials intervene only when local systems are flirting with insolvency.

Some school districts spend their money wisely and effectively and some don't and outcomes largely hinge on the quality of their governance. Those with engaged and committed boards and administrators tend to have better outcomes than those with inconsistent, politics-driven and often chaotic governance.

That's why a massive effort to judge how well California's local school systems are structured and managed is welcome.

Arun Ramanathan, CEO of Pivot Learning, an Oakland-based non-profit organization that advises school systems on improving instruction, created a series of benchmarks to gauge how well school districts are prepared to embrace reforms. He also created a website that allows the public to view the results for every school district with at least 2,500 students.

"Despite billions in investment and decades of effort, new reform efforts rarely have intended impacts at the district, school and classroom level, and sustained improvement is rare,"

Ramanathan told EdSource, a website of education journalism. "There are rarely insights into why. [The District Readiness Index](#) resulted from that questioning."

The ratings cover five "domains" — community relations, finance, leadership, personnel policies and workplace conditions. Users can see how the districts score in each, with overall ratings designated by colors. Blue is the best, yellow is in the middle and orange is the worst.

The grading process resulted in about half of the 420 districts getting yellow grades and about 40% blue marks with roughly two dozen placed in the orange category, meaning they have "few foundations" for achieving needed reforms.

Some of the state's largest districts are colored orange, including Los Angeles Unified, whose enrollment approaches 10% of the state's 6 million public school students.

It's not surprising that LA Unified, Oakland Unified, San Francisco Unified and Sacramento Unified received low marks because all have been in constant political turmoil and financial distress of their own making.

Three of the large districts – San Diego Unified, Elk Grove Unified and San Juan Unified – escaped the orange designation and are marked as yellow.

A few large districts achieved blue status for being well prepared, including Fresno Unified, Long Beach Unified and San Bernardino Unified. But most of the blue districts tend to be either in affluent suburbs – no surprise there – or in rural areas.

Most interestingly, the blue list includes a number of districts with large numbers of poor students, such as Brawley and Calexico in poverty stricken Imperial County.

The District Readiness Index provides new ammunition for the school reform movement in California, which seeks to elevate students' welfare over the petty politics, particularly in Los Angeles Unified and other large districts, that sabotage their educations.
