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## Schools show gains, yet feds say more are failing

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With a 40-point leap, Moreland School District in West San Jose posted the greatest test-score gain among Santa Clara County school districts. It notched 870 on the Academic Performance Index, well above the state's goal of 800.

And yet, under federal rules, Moreland fell, for the second year, onto a list of failing districts. So did half the districts in Santa Clara County, which has the top three elementary scores in the state and 36 of the top 150 scorers.

That contradictory picture, emerging from the state's annual report card released Monday, underscores the overwhelming challenge facing California schools. They're improving but not quickly enough to meet tough federal demands. Schools that fail to meet

those standards eventually could face increased oversight and, in the worst cases, a complete state takeover.

In the data released Monday by the California Department of Education, Santa Clara County showed strong improvement in scores, continuing to outpace the state as a whole. At the same time, the county Office of Education identified 80 schools with federal Program Improvement status, including those that have chronically struggled as well as surprising newcomers such as:

- Cupertino Middle School, which ranked as 49<sup>th</sup> among middle schools in the state.
- ACE Charter, which gained 127 points this year, the highest increase of any school in the county.
- Barron Park Elementary in Palo Alto, whose 861 score is 61 points above the state's goal.

These schools got caught short because federal expectations jumped markedly this year. For 2009-10, for example, the federal standards rose about 10 percentage points on both math and English, so that roughly 57 percent of a school's students were expected to score proficient or above in both subjects.

The climbing federal expectations worry educators, who see the benchmark as counterproductive because it might force a school to abandon strategies that are working.

"Unrealistic expectations for growth are outpacing our rate of improvement," Santa Clara County Superintendent of Schools Charles Weis said.

Statewide, the picture is similar. Only 40 percent of elementary schools and 26 percent of middle schools made Uncle Sam's goal. Not all high school scores have been released, pending 2010 graduation rates, which are expected to be compiled in November.

When the federal government set up the No Child Left Behind education program, states set their own goals and timetable for meeting them. California's standards are considered high and exemplary, but the state also set a low benchmark in the first years of testing. That set the stage for what educators

### SCHOOL GAINS

The following schools showed the highest gains in 2010 API growth scores. (Excludes alternate accountability schools.)

SANTA CLARA COUNTY				
Level	School	District	API score	Gain
Elementary	ACE Charter	Santa Clara County charter	744	127
Middle	Moreland Middle School	Moreland School District	843	75
High	Live Oak High School	Morgan Hill Unified	768	46
	Latino College Prep	East Side Union	671	46
SAN MATEO COUNTY				
Level	School	District	API score	Gain
Elementary	Heather Elementary	San Carlos	921	60
Middle	Ronald McNair Academy	Ravenswood City School District	660	39
High	Aspire East Palo Alto Phoenix Academy	Santa Mateo County charter	791	117

Source: California Department of Education

call the "hockey stick," because standards increase more rapidly in later years, giving a chart of the goals the appearance of such a stick. Now that schools are encountering the handle of the curve, many more fall short of expectations.

And it's not just that expectations are high; it's also that districts are judged by how well student groups who tend to struggle the most are performing.

For example, Moreland first fell into Program Improvement because its students with learning disabilities didn't score high enough in English or math. So the district focused on those students, "and we did great," Superintendent Glen Ishiwata said. But this year, its scores for Latinos, poor students and English learners at one school didn't make the grade.

Ishiwata, like many other educators, says the standards are unrealistic and hopes that Congress will revise them. Being in Program Improvement could mean a forced overhaul of programs, with possible wholesale replacement of teachers and administrators and eventually a state takeover.

About 341 school districts, or nearly one-third of the state's total, and 3,197 schools statewide are in Program Improvement, at a time when the state's pockets are emptier, with fewer resources to guide schools.

"It's clear we will continue to see more and more schools enter PI without regard to progress they continue to make," state schools Superintendent Jack O'Connell said.

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Moreland saw improvement by taking programs that helped Leroy Anderson Elementary post the county's greatest gains in 2009 and spreading them to other campuses.

Focused teaching helped ACE's 203 students, who are almost all Latino, poor and English learners, to post a 127-point API gain. The school, which this year expanded to grades 5-8, uses an extended school day "to intensely personalize the curriculum that every kid is getting," Executive Director Greg Littman said.

It's important to keep focused on the goals, said Superintendent John Porter of the Franklin-McKinley School District, which also is in Program Improvement. The district, which serves some of the poorest children in San Jose, gained 28 points on API.

"Our children deserve to be at grade level," Porter said. "We need to focus on connecting them to academic work."

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