

Parent Guide to the

April 2000



1999 Similar Schools Ranks based on the Academic Performance Index

In January 2000, public schools throughout California received their first Academic Performance Index (API) reports. The API is the cornerstone of the Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) of 1999. It measures the academic performance and progress of schools. Annual growth targets for future academic improvement are determined for schools based on the API. Schools that reach their annual targets will be rewarded. Schools that do not meet their targets will be eligible for interventions or subject to sanctions.

1999 API Reports

The API for 1999 was based on results of the Stanford 9 achievement test, given in spring 1999 as part of the state's Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program. The 1999 API report for each school shows:

- 1999 API score
- 1999 statewide rank
- 1999 rank compared to 100 other schools with similar demographic characteristics
- 1999–2000 API growth target for the school and for significant groups of students in the school
- School demographic characteristics

The API score is on a scale of 200–1000. The statewide and similar schools ranks are on a scale of 1–10. The 1999 API reports can be accessed through the California Department of Education (CDE) website at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/psaa/api>.

Similar Schools Ranks

The API reports include a "similar schools rank." This information shows where a school ranks on a scale of 1–10, compared with 100 other schools with similar demographic characteristics. California public schools serve students with many different backgrounds and needs. As a result, schools face different educational challenges. The 1999 similar schools ranks allow schools to look at their academic performance compared to other schools with some of the same opportunities

and challenges. The comparison of similar schools is required by the PSAA and provides additional information about schools beyond that provided by APIs and statewide ranks. Similar schools ranks are not used to establish eligibility for rewards or interventions provided by the PSAA.

Several school demographic characteristics form the basis for determining the similar schools comparisons. Page 2 of this guide provides a complete listing of the demographic characteristics used. One of those characteristics is the percent of students in school that participate in the free or reduced price lunch program.

The 1999 similar schools ranks were initially released in January 2000. However, many schools did not report the student participation rates in the free or reduced price lunch program as part of the STAR assessment. As a result, the CDE had to request additional information from districts to correct the similar schools ranks. The newly released similar schools ranks, now on the CDE web site, do not affect either the API or the statewide API ranks that were released in January 2000.

Looking Ahead — The 2000 API Report

In the fall of 2000, schools will receive their 2000 API reports. This report will cover the same type of information as in the 1999 API reports. The data used, however, will be from the spring 2000 Stanford 9 test results. The 2000 API report will also include the following new information for each school:

- 1999–2000 school growth (2000 API score minus 1999 API score)
- 1999–2000 school statewide growth rank
- 1999–2000 school growth rank compared to similar schools
- 1999–2000 growth for significant groups of students in the school
- information on whether growth targets were met

Questions and Answers about the Similar Schools Ranks in the 1999 API Report

What is the PSAA?

The PSAA is designed to measure the academic improvement of California public schools, reward those schools that meet their improvement goals, and help those schools that do not meet their goals. A key part of the PSAA is the Academic Performance Index (API) report. Schools received their 1999 API reports in January 2000.

What is the API?

The API measures the performance and progress of a school. It is a numeric index or scale that ranges from a low of 200 to a high of 1000. The state has set 800 as the API score that schools should strive to meet. Schools that fall short of the target will be required to meet annual growth targets until the statewide target of 800 is reached. Schools that already meet or exceed the statewide target of 800 should continue working to improve the academic performance of all their students.

What are the similar schools ranks?

The Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA) of 1999 [Education Code Section 52056(a)] requires the state to

- annually rank all public schools in California based on the API. In 1999, the similar schools ranking compares a school's academic achievement on the API with other schools that have similar demographic characteristics.

What is the purpose of comparing similar schools in the API report?

- California public schools serve groups of students with different backgrounds and needs. As a result, schools face different educational challenges and opportunities. For this reason, it is helpful to provide information about a school's academic achievement as it compares to similar schools.

How are the similar schools ranks used?

- The similar schools ranks can be used in at least two ways. First, schools can use this information as a reference point for judging their academic achievement against other schools facing similar challenges. Second, schools may improve their academic performance by studying what similar schools with higher rankings are doing.

Demographic Characteristics Used to Identify Similar Schools

The law requires that the following school demographic characteristics, or factors, be used to identify the similar schools:

School Demographic Characteristics	How Characteristics Are Determined
Pupil mobility	% of students who first attended the school in the current year
Pupil ethnicity	% of students in the school in each of these ethnic categories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> American Indian or Alaska Native Asian Pacific Islander Filipino Hispanic or Latino African American not Hispanic White not Hispanic
Pupil socioeconomic status	Average of all parent educational level responses for the school % of students in the school that participated in the free or reduced price lunch program
Percentage of teachers who are fully credentialed	% of teachers in the school who are fully credentialed
Percentage of teachers who hold emergency credentials	% of teachers in the school who hold emergency permits
Percentage of pupils who are English language learners	% of students in the school who are classified as English language learners
Average class size per grade level	Average class size at the school for each grade level: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> K-3 4-6 Core academic courses in departmentalized programs
Whether the schools operate multi-track year-round educational programs	Schools are categorized as either operating or not operating multi-track year-round educational programs



What sources were used to collect the demographic data for the 1999 similar schools ranks?

The demographic data for the similar schools ranks came from several sources, including the 1999 administration of the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program, the California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS) School and Professional Assignment Information forms, and the Primary Language Census (R30-LC).

How were the 1999 similar schools ranks calculated?

Several steps were used to calculate the 1999 similar schools ranks. First, schools were divided into grade level categories (elementary, middle, and high schools). Then, a School Characteristics Index (SCI), or composite of the school's demographic characteristics, was calculated for each school. Next, a comparison group of 100 similar schools was formed, based on similar SCIs. Last, the similar schools rank for each school was generated. This ranking was based on the school's API compared with the APIs of other similar schools in the comparison group.

What is the SCI and how is it calculated?

The SCI combines the demographic characteristics of a school. It is calculated through a statistical procedure that produces a single index based on all of the factors included. Schools with SCIs that are close in numerical value face similar educational challenges and opportunities.

Do all 100 schools in the same similar schools rank have the same demographic characteristics?

Each school is unique; therefore, it is impossible to find similar schools that match in every way. In order to form large enough groups of similar schools for meaningful ranks, the procedure used for each SCI allows for some differences between schools.

How were the similar schools ranks determined for 1999?

A comparison group for each school was formed by placing the school's SCI as the median or mid-point (middle) and taking the 50 schools with SCIs just above and the 50 just below. The 100 schools in the comparison group were sorted according to their 1999 API and divided into 10 equal sized groups (deciles). The API of the school was then compared to the APIs of the schools in its group. The school was assigned a decile rank based on this comparison, and that is the rank shown on the report.

How can I find out which schools are in the comparison group for my student's school?

The list of the 100 schools included in each school's similar schools comparison group can be accessed through the CDE web site at <<http://www.cde.ca.gov/psaa/api>>.

Another school in the district has similar students and almost exactly the same API score but a different "similar schools" rank. How can that be?

Even if schools appear quite similar, they may differ with respect to some measured characteristics. Small differences in two school's demographic characteristics and SCIs can result in very different groups of similar schools. If one school's comparison group has a different range of API scores than the other school, the two schools' ranks may differ.

Will the comparison group for my student's school remain the same from year to year?

Your school has received a 1999 similar schools rank which compared the school's **1999 API level** to a group of 100 similar schools. In the fall of 2000, your school will receive a 1999–2000 growth similar schools rank which will compare the school's **1999–2000 API growth** to the *same* 100 similar schools.

In the fall of 2000, your school will also receive a 2000 similar schools rank which will compare its **2000 API level** to a *new* group of 100 similar schools. This new group will be used the following year to establish the school's similar schools rank for **2000–2001 API growth**.

If our school's API score remains the same next year, will its statewide rank be the same as 1999?

Your rank will not necessarily be the same next year, even if your API score remains the same. Your rank may go up or down, depending on how the rest of the schools in the state perform. This is because your statewide rank is a comparison with other schools in the state.

How is a school's socioeconomic status measured?

Socioeconomic status is based on the school's average parent education level and percent of student participation in the free or reduced price lunch program. The source for parent education level is the demographics section of the STAR answer document. For 1999 only, districts provided certified



data of participation in the free or reduced price lunch program. For 2000 and thereafter, the source of participation in the free or reduced price lunch program will be the STAR answer document.

Is a school penalized in any way if the parent educational level is not reported for all students?

Although there is no penalty for *not* providing parent educational levels, a school should do its best to obtain complete information so that its similar schools rank can be as accurate as possible. Reliable parent educational level information is helpful in producing the most appropriate similar schools group for your school.

How can elementary school children, as young as second graders, be expected to report their parents' educational level?

Parent educational level information is provided by the school and district. The method of collecting these data varies across the state, but schools and districts should ensure that the information is as accurate as possible. Young children are not expected to provide this information unassisted.

The similar schools rank for my student's school is higher (about the same, lower) than its statewide rank. How should that be interpreted?

These ranks are calculated in completely different ways and are not related. The statewide API rank compares your school to many schools statewide. The similar schools rank compares your school to 100 schools like yours.

How can the similar schools rank for my student's school be raised?

The SCI, from which the group of similar schools is determined, is designed to reflect demographic characteristics *not* under a school's control. The school should focus on ways to raise its API by improving instruction and student achievement. These efforts will help improve the academic growth of the school and its API.

Where can parents go for more information?

Parents should direct their questions about the API or the PSAA or plans for improving the school's academic performance to the principal or other school administrators. Schools also will be asking parents to become actively involved in the improvement process. Further information about the PSAA and API can be accessed through the CDE website at <<http://www.cde.ca.gov/psaa>>.

Description of Similar Schools Ranks

The similar schools ranks compare an individual school's API to the 100 schools in its comparison group. Schools are ranked in ten equal groups (deciles) from the lowest (one) to the highest (ten). A description of the similar schools ranks follows:

Rank	Description
	This school's API is:
9 or 10	Well above average for elementary, middle, or high schools with similar characteristics
7 or 8	Above average for elementary, middle, or high schools with similar characteristics
5 or 6	About average for elementary, middle, or high schools with similar characteristics
3 or 4	Below average for elementary, middle, or high schools with similar characteristics
1 or 2	Well below average for elementary, middle, or high schools with similar characteristics