

## Another view

# A San Jose school where kids succeed, despite disadvantages

By Joanne Jacobs

State tests measure nothing but ZIP codes, critics say. Despite some progress by disadvantaged and minority students, the new Academic Performance Index (API) numbers still show schools with affluent Asian-American and white students at the top; most schools with low-income Latino and black students lag behind.

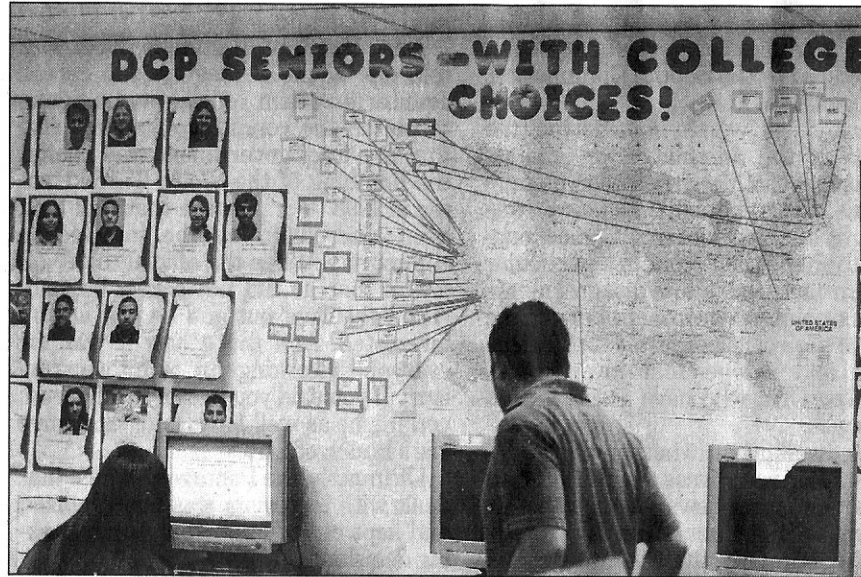
It's the same story on the graduation exam: Low-income Latino and black seniors are the most likely to be retaking the test in hopes of passing by June.

But demographics aren't destiny. There's a lot to learn from schools where students are succeeding, despite their disadvantages.

I've spent nearly five years reporting and writing a book on Downtown College Prep, a San Jose charter high school that recruits students who have done poorly in middle school and prepares them for college. Ninety percent of students are Latino, 61 percent qualify for a free lunch and 38 percent are classified as English learners; half their parents have an elementary education and an additional third didn't get past high school.

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A student at Downtown College Prep walks by a map last year showing graduating seniors and the colleges they planned to attend. The San Jose charter high school recruits students who have done poorly in middle school and prepares them for college, and its API scores are better than the state average.

Yet the school's API scores are better than the state average for all high schools. DCP students who are years behind in reading and math when they start ninth grade catch up and pass more advantaged students. The school has one of the highest pass rates in San Jose on the graduation exam.

DCP's structured curriculum with its relentless focus on preparing students for college, the community spirit, longer school day and smaller classes make a difference.

KIPP Heartwood Academy, a charter middle school in Alum Rock, primarily educates children from immigrant families. The curriculum is

structured and behavior is monitored closely. Results are spectacular: Heartwood's first class of fifth-graders outscored students from upper-middle-class districts like Palo Alto and Saratoga.

When I visited the school in May, I saw fifth-graders learning algebra in a high-energy class.

I asked a boy what he liked least about the school.

"It's hard," he said.

I asked what he liked best.

"It's hard!"

"That's what you like least and best?"

He nodded. "It's good that it's hard," he said. "It makes us smart."

The API scores of elementary schools primarily serving low-income Latino students vary by as much as 250 points, according to a new EdSource study, "Similar Students, Different Results." Researchers led by Stanford's Michael Kirst questioned principals and teachers at 257 schools to determine what high-scoring elementary schools do differently.

Effective schools make student achievement the school's top priority. The principal and teachers define plans to improve teaching and set measurable goals for exceeding API targets.

At these schools, reading, writing and math curricula are designed to teach the state's academic standards; teaching is consistent within grades

and from grade to grade. Teachers don't close the classroom door and do their own thing.

Principals manage instructional improvement with district support. High-scoring schools tend to be in districts that set clear expectations and evaluate principals based on student achievement.

At high-scoring schools, principals and teachers use data on student performance to fine-tune teaching, target help to students who are falling behind and identify teachers who need to improve.

Not surprising, the best schools employ more experienced and certified teachers and supply them with up-to-date textbooks and supplies.

But the high-fliers don't spend more money than schools with similar students and much weaker results, points out Kirst. "These are not high-spending schools by national or state standards."

Parent involvement programs, strong discipline policies and collaboration and training opportunities for teachers had some benefit, but not nearly the impact of prioritizing achievement, implementing a coherent, standards-based curriculum, using data to improve teaching and providing adequate teaching resources.

At least at the elementary school level, this is doable with current funding. It's not rocket science: Teach the children well and they'll learn.

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