

# 12 comeback campuses in county taken off watch list

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A dozen local schools received confirmation yesterday that they've beaten the odds.



Years of low state test scores had landed them on a federal watch list that some say brands schools as failing. Not many schools get off the list.

These did.

They are San Diego County's comeback campuses. Federal report cards released statewide

cleared them from the list and ended federally ordered remedies to boost their pass rates on state tests.

Other local watch-list schools changed curriculum or hired turn-around principals, but these comeback campuses focused on areas such as improving test scores and addressing individual students' needs. The stakes were high: The schools risked losing students because they all had to send letters to parents inviting them to switch to a school that had better scores.

Now, educators are talking about these schools as models from which others can learn.

"It's really magical what's going on here right now," said Wes Braddock, principal of Sweetwater High School in National City.

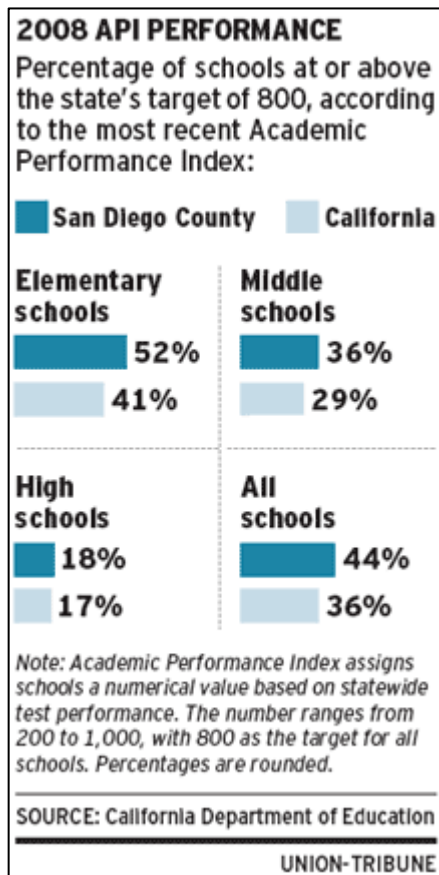
If Sweetwater had remained on the list for a seventh year this year, the school could have been taken over by the state, turned into a charter school or outsourced to private management.

Instead, Sweetwater decided to score its way off the list by boosting its pass rate on the state's high school exit exam. The federal government uses 10th-graders' pass rates on the exam as an indicator of whether a high school makes the grade. For elementary schools, the federal government looks at California Standards Tests in math and English.

Sweetwater set up classes that gave about 180 students double doses of math and reading to prepare them for two high-stakes days of testing in March.

"Once they (students) realized my expectation in the classroom, that no one gets out of here until they've mastered it, then they really did rise to it," said Susan Carreon-Jedlicka, a reading teacher who specializes in the school's toughest cases.

Carla Macias, 16, struggled for years with reading comprehension. She said she felt stupid just being put into Carreon-Jedlicka's class last year – until the teacher assigned her college-level novels.



“She was the only person that never stopped bothering me, to give me that extra push,” Carla said. When test time came, “I wanted her to feel happy for me that I’m finally understanding better English.”

Now an 11th-grader in Advanced Placement English, Carla still visits Carreon-Jedlicka to get extra reading. Yesterday she dropped off “The Catcher in the Rye” and picked up “A Separate Peace.”

As Sweetwater and 11 schools exited the federal watch list, called program improvement, 13 other local schools entered yesterday. Statewide, 266 schools entered program improvement; 116 got off the watch list.

According to *The San Diego Union-Tribune's* review of records, 198 county schools have entered program improvement since 2004 and 45 have exited – about 23 percent.

Four years ago, Chula Vista Learning Community Charter Principal Jorge Ramirez received a letter warning him that the school's charter – its permission to operate independently of the district – was in danger of being revoked if scores didn't improve.

“Basically, the school was on the ropes,” said Superintendent Lowell Billings, who wrote the letter.

Parents saw the charter school's federal listing as an insult, said parent Rachel Morineau.

The school didn't dive into test preparation. It stuck to and improved its dual-immersion program that makes every kindergartener through sixth-grader bilingual. It continued its Microsociety, a mini-town run by student entrepreneurs and lawmakers.

Teachers worked harder, collaborated more and got more training, Ramirez said. They looked at every student's work to see what needed improvement most. And they made many individual fixes.

For Morineau's child, it was changing assigned reading to books about history and science, which interested him.

Many educators have criticized the federal No Child Left Behind Act that created the watch list. The law set minimum pass rates on math and reading tests. Failing schools must implement federal remedies until they rise over the pass rate. Meanwhile, that pass rate increases every year. Last year's “good enough” was failing this year.

That makes it even more unlikely that schools will escape program improvement in the future, said Jack Jennings, president of the Center on Education Policy, an independent research group in Washington, D.C.

“Very soon, these schools are going to be facing huge targets, and they won't be able to make them, especially with budget cuts in California,” he said.

On the other hand, even educators who have been critical of No Child Left Behind said it has prompted more attention to students who were often overlooked.

## Comeback campuses

Twelve schools improved their test scores enough to move off a schedule of federally ordered sanctions known as program improvement.

- Chula Vista Elementary School District: Chula Vista Learning Community Charter; Silver Wing Elementary
- Encinitas Union Elementary School District: Paul Ecke-Central Elementary
- Grossmont Union High School District: Gateway West Community Day
- Oceanside Unified School District: Reynolds Elementary
- San Diego Unified School District: Dana School; John Muir School; San Diego Science and Technology High; Whitman Elementary
- San Marcos Unified School District: San Marcos Elementary,
- South Bay Union Elementary School District: Mendoza Elementary
- Sweetwater Union High School District: Sweetwater High

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“It wasn't the sanctions that motivated us,” said Braddock, the Sweetwater principal. “It was that we were not reaching every kid.”