PROGRESS AND POSSIBILITY IN LOS ANGELES
Student Academic Growth in Los Angeles Unified School District

www.parentrevolution.org
For too long, important decisions about the education that Los Angeles children receive have been made with limited information. Parents decide where to send their children to school, district leaders set policies and approve budgets, educators decide how to teach, and voters decide on the officials that will represent them on the school board.

These decisions are too important to be made in the dark.

Now that new information on student growth has been released, which confirms what many Los Angeles’ families have said for years: that there are schools with great educators where students are making significant progress, but also that there are not enough of these schools for all students.

The release of student growth data gives all of us the opportunity to come together and build a better understanding of what is happening in our schools. It is the first time that we can all use an official, valid dataset to understand the impact that schools have on our children. In a time of competing facts and rancorous division, better information can allow the Los Angeles community to unite for children, even when we disagree about how best to provide all students with the opportunities that they deserve.

**WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US?**

A closer look at the student growth data shows that there are schools that are doing an incredible job at helping low-income students to make meaningful academic progress. There are also troubling patterns of deep racial and economic opportunity gaps. Both the good and bad news are opportunities to act with focus and urgency. While we should feel angry that most of Los Angeles’ students are not meeting standards in English Language Arts and Math, the schools where educators are helping their students catch up give us hope. More than a few scattered bright spots, the number of schools where students are making academic progress reminds us that success for our children is possible, and it should challenge us all to take this matter in our own hands, to ask ourselves what each of us can do.

This report contains our initial analysis of LAUSD’s student academic growth data and why it is so important. If you’re not fired up and ready to act yet, we hope that this information gets you ready to get in the game. You can read it here, or view it on our website, along with interactive graphs: www.parentrevolution.org/analysis
WHAT IT MEANS

Publicly available information on school quality has shown us that there are deep inequities in our education, but because the data has only hinged on proficiency rates, it has been incomplete. Proficiency rates give us a good picture of how students at a school are doing today, but it doesn’t always give us a clear picture the impact a school is having on its students.

We’d probably all agree that a good school is a place that has a positive impact on students. But, it is impossible to know whether or not a school has a positive impact on students just by looking at where those students are right now. We also have to look at where students started. This is especially important in LAUSD, since some schools serve students that start out in a very different place than students at other schools.

Last year, as part of our enrollment equity work, the PEAPS-LA coalition filed public records requests for incoming student proficiency rates at all LAUSD middle and high schools. The district doesn’t publish this information, and to our knowledge this is the first time it’s been shared publicly. It confirms that we can’t understand school quality just by looking at proficiency, since not all school start out with students in a similar place.

In order to make the right decisions for our children and our schools we have to know the impact that schools are having on students, and to know that, we need to know both where students are today and where they started out.
BUT ISN’T THE REAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SCHOOLS JUST POVERTY?

Yes and no.

We hear this a lot, usually as a statement and not a question. It was one of the claims behind the attempt to block the release of student growth data to the public in late 2019.

Here’s how the full argument goes: “We already know which schools are struggling and which schools are doing well. All we have to do is look at the percentage of a school’s students who are socio-economically disadvantaged. Schools with lots of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch struggle and schools with more advantaged students do well. We don’t need any more data, and there’s not much we can do to improve our schools.”

While we disagree with that conclusion, the people who make this argument are mostly right about the data - if you are only looking at proficiency.

There is a clear and disturbing system-wide trend. Throughout Los Angeles, the schools that serve mostly poor children have lower proficiency rates than schools that serve more privileged students.

Systemic problems demands systemic solutions. That’s why we agree that we should vastly increase the amount of funding that is provided for education. School funding is a vital systemic solution, but it’s not the only one. We also should be asking how equitable school-site funding, school planning and educator hiring, assignment, support and evaluation can be improved to engineer a system that gets better results for children who don’t grow up with a lot of money.
There are two main reasons why looking at proficiency and poverty should not cause us to throw up our hands and walk away from our responsibilities to schools and to students. The first is that while comparing proficiency and poverty shows a string trend, it doesn’t show a causal relationship. Of the 495 elementary schools in LAUSD, 396 have a student population that is more than 67% socio-economically disadvantaged. Out of these schools, there are 49 where the average student proficiency is at or above standards in ELA. While we do need real systemic change to go from 49 to 495, there is certainly something to be learned from those high poverty, high proficiency schools, whose students are academically successful, right now, in the system as it is.

Of the 495 elementary schools in LAUSD, 396 have a student population that is more than 67% socio-economically disadvantaged. Out of these schools, there are 49 where the average student proficiency is at or above standards in ELA. While we do need real systemic change to go from 49 to 495, there is certainly something to be learned from those high poverty, high proficiency schools, whose students are academically successful, right now, in the system as it is.

THE OTHER REASON THAT WE CAN’T ACCEPT OUR PUBLIC LEADERS TELLING US THAT CHILDREN’S SUCCESS IS MOSTLY OUT OF THEIR HANDS IS THAT BETTER DATA SIMPLY SHOWS THAT IT IS NOT TRUE.
Unlike proficiency rates, student academic growth takes into account where the students at school started the year and measures how much progress they made from where they started. LAUSD uses the CORE Districts measure of academic growth, which measures how much progress each student at a school makes from year to year, and compares schools with similar students.

The first thing you’ll notice is that unlike proficiency rates, a school’s student growth score is not correlated to poverty.

On the far right of the graph, you’ll see that there are high poverty schools where students aren’t making much progress and schools with the same poverty rate with very high growth scores. The good news? In Los Angeles Unified School District, there are lots of schools that are serving mostly low-income students and are helping those students make meaningful academic progress.

We’ll say that again: IN LAUSD THERE ARE LOTS OF SCHOOLS THAT SERVE MOSTLY LOW-INCOME STUDENTS AND ARE HELPING THOSE STUDENTS MAKE MEANINGFUL ACADEMIC PROGRESS!!!!!!!!!!
In a district that serves mostly socio-economically disadvantaged students who are not yet meeting standards, almost nothing is more important than the progress students make each year on their journey to catch up and succeed.

**We had a few immediate reactions when we saw this graph:**

- While most of Los Angeles' low-income students are starting out behind, many Los Angeles Unified schools are having a positive impact on their learning.
- School quality is real and the work that educators do in schools matters in children’s lives, which is demonstrated by the fact that there are schools in LAUSD with very similar students but very different levels of student growth.
- While too many people have looked at proficiency rates and concluded that “some kids can’t do it,” we look at the growth data and know that all kids can. Many students are starting the race way behind but are able to catch up with the support of educators and their families.

**STUDENT GROWTH DATA LEAVES US WITH IMPORTANT QUESTIONS:**

- What is happening in high growth schools that is leading to such high levels of student progress? What do the educators, families and students in those schools attribute this impact to?
- How is the system enabling or stymieing academic progress? Which policies and practices are intentionally creating the conditions for students to make academic strides? Which policies and practices are hindering it?
- Do the people making system-levels decisions know which schools are achieving high growth? Do local districts, the school board, and district leadership understand why some schools are achieving high growth and others are not? Do they have a plan to apply this understanding to support for schools?
- How can recognition of high growth be used to create momentum for these schools? How many of them have suffered from proficiency rate based negative perception and had trouble attracting staff and enrolling students?
- What resources and support are needed for high growth schools to further accelerate student progress, especially given how far behind many students start?
- How many low-income students have access to high-growth schools for their full K-12 education, so that progress isn’t a series of stops and starts, but sustained until they have caught up with their affluent peers?
- What do our system leaders think about low-growth schools? What can they change right away? What changes are essential, but more challenging? How will they galvanize support for these?

**ULTIMATELY, WE ALL WANT A SCHOOL SYSTEM WHERE ALL CHILDREN, NO MATTER WHERE THEY START OUT, GET WHAT THEY NEED SO THAT THEY CAN SUCCEED AND HAVE GOOD LIVES. THAT MEANS THAT TO GET A TRUE SENSE OF OUR SCHOOLS WE SHOULD BE LOOKING AT BOTH GROWTH AND PROFICIENCY.**
WHAT CAN WE LEARN WHEN WE LOOK AT GROWTH AND PROFICIENCY TOGETHER?

On the graph below, you can see all of LAUSD’s schools based on the average student proficiency as reported on The California School Dashboard, and each school’s growth score as calculated by the CORE Districts and released by LAUSD.

Schools to the right of the graph have higher student proficiency and schools in the upper portion have higher student growth. Each dot represents one LAUSD school. The dots are color coded to represent each school’s percentage of socio-economically disadvantaged students.

Our first look at this graph confirms what we saw when we examined proficiency and poverty. Most LAUSD elementary schools with high poverty rates have low student proficiency. That’s why most of the red and orange dots are to the left of the graph, and why most of the dots to the right are shaded green. We also see something else, which allows us to start thinking about distinct segments of Los Angeles’ schools.
Among those low proficiency schools, there are schools where students are making progress and there are schools where students are falling further behind. Those are two very different sets of circumstances that should warrant different questions and reactions from educators, families and policy-makers. Similarly, when we look to the right side of the graph at the schools where many students have already achieved proficiency, we see schools where those students are continuing to excel when compared with similar students. We also see schools where students are doing well right now, but are not keeping pace with similar students who attend other schools.

It is very different for a parent to enroll their child in a middle school where most students are behind, but educators are helping them catch up versus sending them to a middle school where students who are already behind are losing their chance day by day to be ready for college.

Likewise, when local districts or communities of schools review school plans and create strategies to support for schools, are they effectively differentiating between schools with the same type of proficiency, but very different types of growth?

WHERE ARE STUDENTS ALREADY DOING WELL AND ALSO MAKING LOTS OF PROGRESS?

Below, you can see the schools where students have high proficiency and high growth.
This graph shows schools with low student proficiency and high student growth. We think this is the most important slice of data of all. These are the schools that give us the greatest hope.

We know that most of LAUSD’s students are behind. So, the biggest question that LAUSD must answer is:

“What do we do so that students who are behind today, are successful in their future?”

These schools, which have ratings of high or very high growth, show what is possible. They also show that there is expertise we can learn from now, so that we can make these kinds of schools the norm across the district.
Earlier in our analysis, we used a simple definition for a “good school” as one that has a positive impact on students. We also showed that there are some LAUSD schools that enroll mostly students who are already doing well academically, or who are starting their K12 education more prepared. While these students, their families, and their educators may feel confident because students are doing well right now, at some of these “high-proficiency” schools, students are actually making much less year to year progress than their similar peers at other schools.
While student growth data reminds us that many of our schools are incredible and inspiring places, we also need to recognize what else it reveals to us.

In Los Angeles today, there are about 85,000 students who are enrolled in low-proficiency, low-growth schools. They are the furthest behind and are falling further behind each day. We should be very worried about them.

These schools have been hidden for years amongst an indistinguishable sea of low proficiency schools, and the scale of the assumed challenge has rendered leaders unwilling or unable to act. Student growth data shows us once and for all, it’s not the kids. It’s the schools.

What is happening in these schools? Why? What will happen to these children? Who will stand up for them in a meaningful way?
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATION LEADERS

Improve the Data

Los Angeles Unified should be commended for releasing student growth data in 2019. California in one of only two states in the country that does not make a measure of student progress available to the public. LAUSD joined Oakland, Fresno and Long Beach in stepping up where the state has stalled. There are several things we believe that LAUSD should do to improve the quality and usefulness of growth data.

Continue to release growth data

The accuracy of the story told by growth data will improve with each year, when we can see multi-year trends of student progress. The initial release of data almost did not take place, and it took a massive parent organizing effort to prevent the school board from suppressing the information. In future years, facts should not be the subject of political fights.

Include all school and programs within LAUSD

The first release of student growth data did not include independent charter schools, and it did not report on all magnet programs. Including all LAUSD schools would improve decision making for families and policymakers.

Disaggregate SPED and EL Populations

It is powerful that the student growth data set allows us to see how schools are doing for all students as well as for specific student groups. Further disaggregation of students with disabilities would provide a more clear understanding of the academic progress being made by students with different disability classifications. The same type of differentiation would be helpful between English learner typology, so we can distinguish between newer and long term English learners.

Eliminate percentile ranks

There is a lot that makes sense about the CORE growth measure, especially that it measures students' individual progress and compares that to similar students. However, LAUSD’s final measures are reported in a percentile rank, which is why we see so many schools located in the average growth band. It also means that definitionally, we would never have a situation where all schools scored very high growth. We would prefer to know what percentage of each school’s students meet their individual growth target for the year.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATION LEADERS

Focus on Engagement and Understanding

This information is only useful if all of the people involved in the education of Los Angeles’ children can access and understand it.

Use the information to inform strategy and planning

- District leadership, including the school board, local district superintendents and directors, and school leaders should integrate the data into their discussions.
- Leadership should listen to educators and families to understand what they believe is behind their schools’ success or struggles, and use this information to understand district policies and practices that contribute to school performance.

Increase data transparency in other areas to reveal the complete story of the schools system and individual schools

- Share more information about school staffing, including hiring and support.
- Share information on school budgeting and spending in ways that allow for public understanding.

Integrate student growth data into school level reports and present it in ways that are most useful to families and educators

- Report growth and proficiency side by side, rather than relying on 3rd party organizations to create useful tools.
- Growth and proficiency data should be readily available on school profiles, in LAUSD’s e school finder tool, and throughout the unified enrollment process so that parents have the best information to find schools for their children.

Develop a comprehensive engagement plan to build understanding of the growth measures among families, educators, and school communities

- Access to this information can not be optional or happenstance, there needs to be district oversight to make sure that schools and local districts are truly engaging their families, students and educators to understand the information.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATION LEADERS

Commit to Action

Produce Good, Consistent Plans With Clear Goals
• Right now, LAUSD creates a variety of plans for its schools, but they do not add up to a coherent and focused strategy to increase student success. LAUSD should use student growth data in communities of schools plans, single plans for students success and the LCAP.

Take accountability for growth
• Use student growth measures, along with proficiency rates, in the evaluation of the superintendent, local district superintendents, communities of schools directors, and principals.

Focus on student results in policy making
• The school board must take an informed approach to its policy-making and its evaluation of existing practices. Each board member cannot have their own set of facts that drives their priorities. Even when differences exist in the approach to sustain and improve schools, elected leaders must work from a shared set of good information.

Use a good, consistent set of information when making decisions about new schools and programs
• Over the past several years the district has rapidly expanded its magnet programs, citing both that these programs are popular with families and that they are “higher-performing” schools. This strategy should be evaluated using both information about magnet enrollment patterns and by using growth/proficiency data to understand the true success of magnets and the need for them in any particular community.
• LAUSD is the biggest charter school authorizer in California. The also has the responsibility to support the work of good charter schools, to shut down the charter schools that are not serving their students well and to approve new charters when they fill student need. With the passage of AB 1505, LAUSD has the additional responsibility of defining consistent criteria for charter school approval and renewal. For both approval and renewal decisions, LAUSD should consistently use both student proficiency and student growth to understand the need for new schools and the impact of existing schools.

Rally the public behind the promise of public education by using student growth
• The transformation of our public education system into one that is just and equitable will require massive public commitment and will. Recent efforts like the attempt to raise revenue through the Measure EE parcel tax have taken a deficit mindset and made the appeal for greater public funding based on what LAUSD cannot currently accomplish. Student growth data gives us a much better opportunity to build public will for public education. LAUSD can point to itself and many of its schools as worthy of greater public investment. If so many of these under-resourced schools are making meaningful progress, how much more could we accomplish together with greater resources?

Trust families, educators and students with the truth.

Where the data is disturbing, our educational leadership needs to own it, build partnerships and commit to change - even when hard, even when structural, even when opposed by powerful interests.
CREATING THE SCHOOLS THAT OUR CHILDREN DESERVE ISN’T JUST UP TO EDUCATION LEADERS.

VISIT WWW.PARENTREVOLUTION.ORG/ACTION TO GET INVOLVED.