

There Was No “Oceanside Miracle”

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Remember the “Oceanside miracle”? After Proposition 227 passed in California in 1998, Oceanside became the model all-English district by eliminating all traces of Spanish from school life, and the claim was made that because of this, test scores went up dramatically for Oceanside’s English learners.

Test scores did go up briefly, but it is not at all clear that Proposition 227 deserves the credit. It has been pointed out that pre-Proposition 227 scores were unusually low, and there is evidence that these low scores were a result of the poor quality of Oceanside’s bilingual program; it was undersupplied¹ and was nearly all-Spanish.²

Second, in addition to going all-English, there was a great emphasis on test preparation in the Oceanside district after 227 passed. At one school, “morning assemblies were eliminated. Noneducational field trips were canceled, teacher training workshops shelved. All done so the elementary schools could concentrate on language arts and math.” In addition, strong carrots (financial rewards) and sticks (threats of school closure) were instituted (Parnet, 2001).

Most important, all California scores improved between 1998 and 2000, which is typical of what one sees when a new test is introduced (Linn, Graue, and Sanders, 1990). Hakuta (2000) concluded that gains for Oceanside’s English learners were “not remarkable,” but were similar to gains made in many California districts that retained bilingual education after 227 was passed (see also Orr, Butler, Bousquet, and Hakuta, 2000).

What has happened since 2000? If Proposition 227 was indeed a good idea, Oceanside English language learners should be doing very well, far better than those in other districts with looser policies with respect to using the first language in instruction.

But both redesignation and test score data suggest that Oceanside’s ELLs are clearly not setting the world, or even their own district, on fire.

Redesignation

Table I presents the percentage of students “redesignated” as fluent English proficient each year since 1998. Use of redesignation data as a measure of the efficacy of a program is problematic, as districts vary as to the criteria they use, and criteria can change from year to year. Critics of bilingual education, however, have pointed to the “low” rate of redesignation in California as a sign of the failure of bilingual education.

If redesignation rate is a valid measure, Oceanside does not look good. The district’s redesignation rates have generally lagged behind those for the entire state of California, with no sign of Oceanside’s closing the gap, and with no improvement since 227 passed (which is also true of the state of California), the only exception being the unusual 17.8% redesignation figure for Oceanside in 2001.

Table I. Redesignation Rates, Oceanside and State of California

	Oceanside	California
2005	7.7	9
2004	6.4	8.3
2003	2.2	7.7
2002	8.4	7.8
2001	17.8	9
2000	4.1	7.8
1999	6.6	7.6
1998	5.4	7

Source: Ed Data, California Department of Education

Grissom (2004) provides a different analysis. Grissom followed cohorts of students over time, beginning in 1998, from grade 2 to 5, reporting on the cumulative percentage reclassified as fluent in English each year. As shown in Table II, Oceanside’s redesignation rates are not strikingly different from the state average.³ The 7% superiority of the 1999-2002 Oceanside cohort over the 1999-2002 state cohort is the result of the scores of only 23 Oceanside children (7% of 327). (The unusual fluctuation in redesignation rates for Oceanside are discussed in footnote 5 below.)

Table II. Redesignation Data: Oceanside and State of California, according to Cohorts

	CALIFORNIA	CALIFORNIA	CALIFORNIA	OCEANSIDE	OCEANSIDE
Cohort	1998-2001	1999-2002	2000-2003	1998-2001	1999-2002
N	58,775	72,809	78,729	239	327
Grade 2	1.50%	1.40%	2.20%	0.80%	1.20%
Grade 3	5.40%	6.90%	10.50%	4.60%	30.60%
Grade 4	15.50%	20.40%	23.50%	4.60%	37.60%
Grade 5	29.70%	32.30%	32.30%	30.50%	39.40%

Source: Grissom (2004)

Standardized Test Scores

Examination of standardized test scores confirms that Oceanside’s ELLs are performing no better than those in other districts in California. They even appear to be slightly worse.

California has used two different tests in recent years. From 1998 to 2002, students took the SAT9, which was replaced by the CAT6 in 2003. SAT9 scores were reported in terms of the percentage scoring at or above the 50th percentile of a national sample. CAT6 scores are reported in terms the percentage scoring at the “proficient” level or above. The California Department of Education website notes that the SAT9 and CAT6 are published by different companies and were normed on different national samples. Thus, they cannot be compared.

We can, however, use these scores to compare Oceanside’s ELLs to ELLs statewide. As shown in Table III, in 1998, the first administration of the SAT9 in California, Oceanside ELLs were well below the state average for English learners, and, as mentioned previously, their scores were extremely low. The increase seen between 1999 and 2000 is, as noted above, the evidence for the “Oceanside miracle.”

But there are no signs of miracles after 2000: In general, since 1999, Oceanside’s ELLs have performed slightly below the state average. Since 2001, Oceanside beat the state average only three times out of 20 comparisons, and was worse in 15 comparisons, with two ties.⁴

Table III. SAT9/CAT6 Scores for ELLS: Oceanside/Statewide

Year	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Test
2005	18/18	10/12	20/19	11/13	CAT6
2004	14/15	8/10	9/15	12/12	CAT6
2003	14/15	13/12	12/13	5/9	CAT6
2002	30/33	12/13	17/20	5/12	SAT9
2001	31/28	17/20	12/17	7/11	SAT9
2000	28/25	16/15	16/15	11/10	SAT9
1999	18/19	8/12	8/12	10/9	SAT9
1998	3/15	2/9	3/9	0/8	SAT9

CAT6 scores = percentage scoring “proficient” or better

SAT9 scores = percentage scoring above 50th percentile (national norms)

Source: California Department of Education

Conclusion

The original increase in Oceanside’s test scores from 1998 to 2000 cannot be credited to dropping bilingual education, and Oceanside has not shown unusual success since that time. If one accepts test scores or redesignation rates⁵ as valid measures, there was no Oceanside miracle.

References

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Notes

¹ Before Proposition 227, books were in very short supply in at least one Oceanside school with a significant number of limited English proficient students: Before 227, "a lot of students (at Laurel Elementary School) didn't even have books" (Parnet, 2000).

² The bilingual program was reported to be all in Spanish, which lasted "up to four years, even longer for some. Only after being designated fluent in English would a child's learning in English begin in earnest" (Noonan, 2000).

³ Grisson does not identify Oceanside by name but refers to it as the "model" district.

⁴ Test scores are strongly affected by poverty. Oceanside's slightly lower performance as compared to the state average for ELLs may be due to the slightly higher level of poverty in the district: Fifty-six percent of Oceanside students tested in 2005 were classified as economically disadvantaged, compared to 52% for the entire state. This figure, however, applies to all students, not only ELLs.

⁵ Crawford (2002) notes that there may be a negative relationship between redesignation and test scores for ELLs. If districts have high criteria for redesignation, more high-scoring children will remain classified as ELL, which will have the effect of increasing the average ELL score. This effect should be most obvious in grades 3,4, and 5, where most students eligible for redesignation are. Crawford points out that in Oceanside, only 4% were redesignated in 2000, and ELL scores were indeed high (table 3). If redesignation criteria are looser, more high-scoring children will exit, which will decrease the average score. Crawford notes that in 2001, nearly 18% of ELLs were redesignated in Oceanside. Inspection of table 3 shows that scores in grades 3,4, and 5 dropped noticeably. Regardless of which measure is used, however, the overall Oceanside record is not impressive.