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Hillsborough tops the state with test scores

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For the fourth year in a row, the Hillsborough City Elementary School District had the number one Academic Performance Index scores for a transitional kindergarten to eighth grade district in California.

The district walked away with scores ranging from 956 to 978, a six-point drop from last year, but still top in the state. North Hillsborough had a Growth Score of 978, while South Hillsborough's Growth Score was 956, West Hillsborough's was 978 and Crocker Middle School's was 961.

"It starts with high-quality teachers," said Superintendent Anthony Ranii. "The staff goes the extra mile for the kids. We have a supportive school board that makes the right choices. Parents also take the time; keeping kids ready for school and providing funds."

Core partnerships with community groups like the Hillsborough Schools Foundation have also helped the schools stay strong, Ranii said.

The 2013 Growth API data reveals that of San Mateo County's 166 schools, 109, or 66 percent, achieved a school-wide performance target API of at least 800, the highest number yet since the inception of the state's accountability system in 2002. API is determined from statewide Standardized Testing and Reporting results. Despite this achievement at the school level, API scores for the county's districts and the state showed a slight dip from last year. The API is a numeric index that ranges from a low of 200 to a high of 1,000.

School Board President Lynne Esselstein attributes the high scores to the hard work of kids, teachers and district staff.

"The hard work is really about what's doing what's best for kids," Esselstein said. "We're focusing on the instructional stuff, not necessarily the tests themselves. The whole community supports us. Schools are what Hillsborough has going for it; it's really a focal point. We don't have a downtown or a lot of businesses here. Schools hold a special place in people's hearts."

Changes are also coming to the state though with curriculum and ultimately testing. The new Common Core standards shift to team collaborative learning, with less time spent on lectures and more of an emphasis on students using technology in classrooms. New Smarter Balance testing, which aligns with these new standards, will go into effect during the 2014-15 school year. Since 1998, California school districts spent a significant amount of time preparing for STAR tests, which were unpopular among some for a variety of reasons.

In 2012, two Hillsborough elementary schools even acted as pilot sites for the Smarter Balance Assessments.

Will the new tests affect the district's scores?

"I'm not worried about the scores," Ranii said.

The district may find test scores drop in the few years of administering the new tests, but that the district will make changes accordingly based on data it gets from students' performances on the exams, Ranii said.

State Assembly Bill 484, an overhaul of the state's student assessment system to support California's switch to the Common Core State standards, would allow for nearly all of the STAR tests to be suspended during trials of new Smarter Balance Assessments. The state Senate passed the bill yesterday. It now heads to the Assembly for a vote before it can be considered by Gov. Jerry Brown for his signature.

Although not taking a particular stance on the bill, Ranii noted that there will be a lot of time and effort put into the new instruction.

"This is a big transition," Esselstein said. "Assessments are one facet of accountability."

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