In considering the current School Accountability Report Card (SARC), it became apparent to us that the SARC did not provide an accurate portrayal of schools. The focus on test scores overshadowed many other elements that greatly affect a student’s ability to learn and perform in school. The goal of this SARC is to provide those missing pieces. We have shifted the focus from test scores to the school environment and its staff. This SARC is the result of 64 hours of observations at the listed school, which will remain unnamed in this publication. It must be emphasized that the information included in this SARC and not provided in the original SARC is solely our opinion as a result of the time we spent at this school. One of the limits of these observations is that observers do not always have a full picture of the situation, and in this case, we tried our best to obtain as much information as possible through participating in the school environment and through casual interactions with both students and staff members. To help the reader distinguish between the information listed on the original SARC from the new information and opinions added, the writings of the two observers are in italics.

The focus of this SARC was to make the statistics and numbers understandable to the general public. We have included extra explanation of charts and data, as well as information that we considered pertinent and helpful to the general public. However, in the end, for those that are truly concerned about the state of this particular school, the best way to gather information is to visit the school and find out what is really happening there through the people who have to experience it every day: the students and staff members.

**Teacher Evaluations**

*The data states that 34 teachers were evaluated during the 2000-2001 school year, but no information is provided as to the process or result of that evaluation. One staff member asserts that, “95% of the teachers are good teachers here.” While it may be unnecessary*
to provide the explicit details of the evaluations here, such as the name of the teacher, it would be helpful to make the process of evaluations public. For instance, how are teachers evaluated? Who evaluates them? What takes place after an evaluation? What is done, in terms of intervention, for teachers who do fare well on the evaluation?

**Professional Development**

As listed on the original SARC, the following is a list of the types of activities used for the professional development of teachers:

- Faculty meetings
- Staff development sessions
- Grade level/departmental meetings
- College level courses
- Inservice classes from District/Unit/Division
- Conferences and/or workshops
- New teacher training

From our observations, we are certain that most, if not all of these activities are in place for Sierra Park teachers. However, it is also important to gauge how the staff prioritizes such activities. Some information that we would have liked to have for this particular SARC is: how often do these meetings take place? What are the topics/agendas of those meetings? What is the percentage of teacher attendance rate? This information is important for parents and concerned community members because, as they are all assured that teachers are constantly trained and retrained, it is helpful to see precisely what the staff is working on. This not only gives a better picture of the goals of the staff, but also the priorities of the staff.

One concern that was raised by a staff member was that teachers were notified at the last minute for some of these meetings. This becomes an issue when some meetings may be held across town or, as it is the case for many teachers, the lack of preparation leads to a conflict with personal life and family obligations. It has also been observed that a teacher was pulled out of her classroom for approximately 30 to 45 minutes for an “emergency” meeting, leaving her students with an aide to work on worksheets.

**Substitute Teachers**

The original SARC states: This school has experienced various levels of difficulty in obtaining substitute teachers to provide classroom instruction for absent teachers. Last year the approximate average yearly absence for teachers was 6.984 day(s).

In our observation, we did not witness any of these difficulties obtaining a substitute teacher first hand. Since Sierra Park is on a track schedule, many teachers who are not on track come in to substitute when needed.

**Curriculum and Instruction**

**Curriculum**
Below is a discussion of the Open Court reading Program. We felt that it was important to include such a discussion because such a large percentage of LAUSD’s time and funding has gone into this program.

At the very core of LAUSD’s curriculum is Open Court. It is a reading program that focuses on phonemic awareness, phonics, word knowledge, comprehension skills and strategies, inquiry skills and strategies, and writing and language art skills and strategies. It is a research-based curriculum grounded in systematic and explicit instruction of the above listed areas. Open Court is used in many, but not all, of the LAUSD schools and it has been cited as the reason why test scores are on the rise for these schools. Every new teacher entering Sierra Park is required to go to Open Court training and teachers are constantly being retrained for the program. Every day, each class at Sierra Park spends three hours on Open Court. Throughout the week, the class will read a story numerous times, answer comprehension questions, and complete extension activities for the reading. In kindergarten, since the focus is much more on phonemic awareness, the class spends much of its time doing repeated readings of the text. In the higher grades, students will use text to write essays and to learn inquiry skills and strategies such as “compare and contrast”. The instruction is explicit in that it asks students to employ the specific skills that are being taught. For instance, instead of asking second graders to write about what they liked about a story on whales, they are being told to compare and contrast different types of whales, and to write expository essays focusing on their favorite way. Each unit in Open Court focuses around a theme such as “Space”, “Kindness”, or “Friendship”. Activities and readings of each unit centers on its theme. At the end of each unit, the students must complete an assessment, targeting the skills they were to have learned in the previous unit.

While Open Court has been lauded for the jump in test scores, critics have vocalized concerns. Since Open Court is a program of explicit and focused instruction, teachers are given all of the instructions and material that they need for each unit. In the teacher’s edition of textbooks, there are even scripts, suggesting the questions that teachers should ask and providing examples of the responses that the students may pose. Some feel that this stifles a teacher’s creativity and takes away the teacher’s autonomy over his/her classroom instruction. Also, since Open Court takes up such a large part of the school day, teachers are left with little time to do other things with their students, such as art and music. However, proponents argue that Open Court does indeed allow for, and even suggests ideas for, inclusion of other subject areas, such as art and music, but it is up to the teacher to plan efficiently so that he/she can include it in the unit. Open Court also alleviates the problems associated with limited teacher experience. It is argued that since the program is scripted and comes complete with materials, less experienced teachers will have less to worry about.

Sierra Park is currently in their third year of Open Court. Open Court was instituted as part of their Action Plan to raise their Academic Performance Index (API). Sierra Park was designated as an II/USP school or Intermediate Intervention/Underperforming School Program, as determined by the drop in student achievement measured by the API. During this time, independent district-approved evaluators offered assistance in running the school. Open Court is a result of their intervention. For more information on II/USP schools, please refer to http://www.decentschools.org/whatis_iiusp.pdf.

Following is an excerpt from an article written by John Espinoza, an elementary school teacher who submitted an article to the Los Angeles Times in 1998 (see http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/linguistics/people/grads/macswan/LAT87.htm), in response to Proposition 227.
In LAUSD, we have something called a Master Plan for English Learners. It is important to note that Sierra Park no longer uses the Master Plan. This plan combines the goals of English learning and academic achievement for every non-English speaking student in the district. The plan includes instruction in the child's primary language. Experience and research have shown that the development of a child's first language sets a solid foundation for the learning of a second language. The Master Plan for English Learners is not based on politics; it is based on empirical research in the fields of linguistics and language acquisition.

It is our understanding that Sierra Park no longer uses the Master Plan in compliance with Proposition 227. We have found, however, that there are teachers willing to use Spanish when necessary in the classroom to facilitate student learning. However, we believe that this type of system is, as Valenzuela states, subtractive in that students are required to choose between two cultures, their own and the dominant culture which is produced in the school system. Students' bilingualism is therefore not recognized, relegated to being a barrier instead of an asset (262). With the increase in the API of Sierra Park and the use of Open Court, the Master Plan may never be duplicated thereby offering an incomplete education to its English Language Learners.

Standards

As educators and administrators are constantly encouraging parents to get involved in their children’s education, one vital piece of information that has not been made readily available for parents is the state standards. If parents are expected to participate in their children’s education, they will be much more effective if they are informed about what the child is supposed to be learning.

For information of California's student standards for all grade level, visit [http://www.cde.ca.gov/standards](http://www.cde.ca.gov/standards)

Fiscal and Expenditure Data

We felt it was important to keep the fiscal data in our SARC because it is a way that parents and community members can monitor the district in its spending. Admittedly, these numbers do not provide a full picture, but it does give an idea about where the money is going.

Average Salaries (Fiscal Year 1999-2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salary Type</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginning Teacher Salary</td>
<td>$32,569</td>
<td>$32,678</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-Range Teacher Salary</td>
<td>$47,532</td>
<td>$50,891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Teacher Salary</td>
<td>$61,169</td>
<td>$62,446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Principal Salary</td>
<td>$85,499</td>
<td>$82,126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendent Salary</td>
<td>$192,454</td>
<td>$144,995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Budget for Teacher’s Salaries</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Budget for Administrative Payrolls</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Expenditures and Services**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Total Spent</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
<th>Money Spent Per Average Daily Attendant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>$5,800,740</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>$5361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Support</td>
<td>$419,112</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>$387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil Services</td>
<td>$96,714</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>$89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Maintenance</td>
<td>$154,095</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>$142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Operation</td>
<td>$356,425</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>$329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil Transportation</td>
<td>$55,604</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>$51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$6,882,690</strong></td>
<td><strong>99%</strong></td>
<td><strong>$6,359</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Explanation of Direct Expenditure Classifications:**

**Instruction:** Salaries and employee benefits of teachers and aides, textbooks, instructional materials.

**Instructional Support:** Instructional and school administration, instructional media, educational television, and computer assisted instruction.

**Pupil Services:** Attendance, welfare, guidance, counseling, and health activities.

**School Maintenance:** Repainting, resurfacing grounds, roof repair and related equipment acquisitions, and replacement.

**School Operations:** Cleaning and utilities, gardening, trash disposal, and laundry services.

Pupil Transportation: Cost of conveying pupils to and from school activities and between home and school. Does not include field trips.

While the explanations given above are helpful in relation to the chart, we thought that it would be even more beneficial, if these categories were further broken down. For instance, if, in the case of Sierra Park, $5.8 million dollars was spent on “Instruction”, there should be a percentage breakdown to show precisely how much of the money went to textbooks. It is not necessary to record every pencil purchased, but a more detailed break down of the expenses would given parents and community members a better idea of where the money is going.

**Academic Data**

On the original SARC, this area was used to focus on test scores and listed the Academic Performance Index of the school, its Stanford 9 scores, its scores on the California Standards Tests (CST), and scores on the Aprenda, an assessment test used for Spanish speaking English learners. Below, you will find an explanation of the API, as well as a description of the tests that the students have to take. All of the test scores, except for the API, have been removed because the creators of this SARC did not feel that it was a valid representation of the students at Sierra Park Elementary. Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton write in their book, *Teaching to Change the World*, that all tests have two elements in common: they claim objectivity, and tests claim to be “fair and accurate tools for sorting students for future schooling opportunities” (Oakes, 245). Oakes and Lipton assert that while tests claim to be objective, “the decision to include particular questions, the grading scale, the amount of time given for instruction and to take the test, and the weight or importance given to the test are all subjective decisions” (Oakes, 245). In 1999, the National Academy of Sciences studied the ways that tests scores should be
used. For this study, the Academy studied tracking, grade promotion, and high school graduation and investigated the way tests measured student achievement. The following are a set of principles that was set forth as a result of that study:

- The test is valid for the specific purpose for which it is used. For example, tests that might be good for influencing classroom practice are not valid for making decisions about students unless they match the curriculum and the teaching that students actually experience.
- Because no test is perfect, no single score can be considered a definitive measure of students’ knowledge.
- A single test score should not be used for making consequential decisions in the absence of other information about students’ knowledge and skills.
- A test-driven decision cannot be justified if the consequence is not educationally sound.
- Differences in test results and consequences among groups of students – such as the lower scores and higher retention rates of low-income students of color – must be carefully studied.

- Oakes, 253

Given this, it is unnecessary to include the test scores here, as there is no sufficient information to explain the test scores. However, it is still important to understand the tests and standards by which students and schools are judged.

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**Academic Performance Index (API)**

According to the California Department of Education’s website on the API, “the Academic Performance index (API) is the corner stone of California’s Public School Accountability Act (PSAA). The purpose of the API is to measure the academic performance and growth of schools. It is a numeric index (or scale) that ranges from a low of 200 to a high of 1000.” (http://www.cde.ca.gov/psaa/api/) The following information, also taken from the listed website, is on how each school receives its API.

**How it is Calculated**

- Individual student scores on the Stanford 9 and the California Standard Tests are combined into a single number to represent the performance of that school. The percentages of students scoring within each of five nation percentile rank (for the Stanford 9) and standards-based performance levels (For the CST) are weighted and combined to produce a summary result for each content area. Summary results for content areas are then weighted and combined to produce a single number between 200 and 1000.

**How Subject Areas are Weighted**

- In grades 2-8: Stanford 9 mathematics 40%, reading 12%, language 6%, and spelling 6%. The CST is weighted for 36%.
- In grades 9-11: Stanford 9 mathematics 20%, reading 8%, language 8%, history-social science 20%, and science 20%. The CST is weighted at 24%.

Currently the target API for all California schools is 800.

If not already obvious, the criteria for using such tests is very ambiguous and arcane. The weighting of the scores is a seemingly arbitrary standard by which students and overall school performance is judged.

The following data for the API for Sierra Park only includes scores up to 2002.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent Tested</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
<td></td>
<td>Percent Tested</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>API Score</td>
<td>489</td>
<td>487</td>
<td>583</td>
<td>622</td>
<td>API Score</td>
<td>487</td>
<td>578</td>
<td>622</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
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<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth Target</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Actual Growth</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>+91</td>
<td>+39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statewide Rank</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar Schools Rank</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Statewide Rank**: Schools receiving an API score are ranked in ten categories of equal size from one (lowest) to ten (highest), according to the type of school (elementary, middle, or high school).

**Similar Schools Rank**: This is a comparison of each school with 100 other schools with similar demographic characteristics. Each set of 100 schools is ranked by API score from one (lowest) to 10 (highest).

**Growth Target**: This number indicates the number of points that a school has set as a target to grow. Within each school, students of different ethnicities can be given a different goal. Thus, a school can be said to have reached its target growth as a whole, even if only one group of students does well because the growth of one group can offset the deficit of another.

The most updated information on the API of individual schools can be found at [http://api.cde.ca.gov/](http://api.cde.ca.gov/)