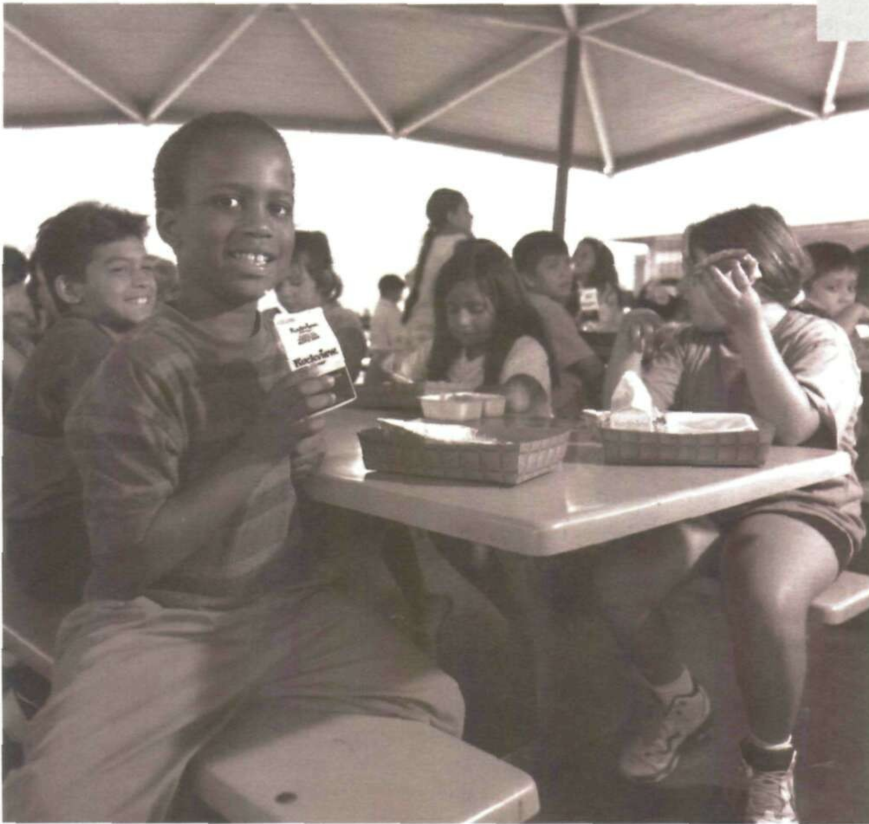
Los Angeles School

Does the nation's second largest school district have what it takes to educate a diverse, multicultural student population, and are its troubles a signal for all California?

By Sigrid Bathen

Lunchtime at Multonah Street Elementary School



The numbers are staggering. Total enrollment in the Los Angeles Unified School District in 1996-97: 667,624 and climbing. Primary languages spoken by "limited English proficient" (LEP) students: more than 80, most of them Spanish-speaking (286,983), but also 4,923 Armenian, 3,916 Korean, 3,044 Chinese, 2,511 Filipino, 1,568 Vietnamese, 1,484 Russian, 899 Farsi, 730 Khmer, 471 Thai. Down the list in this dizzying linguistic melting pot to the double and finally the single digits: nine Finnish, six Nepali, five Swedish, five Yoruba, two each Afrikaans, Fijian, Javanese, Khmu, Marshallese, Melanesian, Norwegian and Mongolian. A sole Swahili speaker, an Albanian, a Cherokee, a Dane, a Guamanian and a Kurd.

In its 1996-97 Bilingual Program Survey required by the state Department of Education, the school district noted that "this was the sixth consecutive year in which the LEP enrollment exceeded the English-only student enrollment." Overall, the percentage of students whose primary language is English was 35 percent. In 1981-82, LEP students accounted for 22 percent of

Unified District

Photos by Ken Coleman. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Science Laboratory students, Foshay Learning Center. (right) Dr. Michele Roland examines student at Hollywood High School Health Center.

total enrollment; by 1996-97, that figure had jumped to 47 percent.

By law, all must be educated, preferably in their native languages until they can transition into English — a process that school district officials say requires an average of five years, depending on the English proficiency of the students, the language spoken at home, and a variety of other educational, social and cultural factors. It is a daunting task, complicated by the poverty in which many recent immigrants live, the crime and decay in their mostly central-city neighborhoods, and the dismal test scores and overcrowded, crumbling buildings at many of the schools they attend.

As of fall 1996, according to district figures, fully 68 percent of the student body in Los Angeles Unified was Hispanic, with African Americans a distant second at 14 percent, non-Hispanic whites 11 percent, Asians 4.4 percent and Filipinos 1.9 percent. Only .7 percent were classified as Pacific Islander/American Indian/Alaska Native. In the 100 schools with the lowest test scores, white students account for only 1.6 percent, according to a recent *Los Angeles Times* survey of the district's 100 "lowest performing" schools. Latinos accounted for 72.3 percent, blacks 23.2 percent and Asian/Pacific Islanders 9 percent.

The *Times* survey was published in July 1997, in response to Superintendent Ruben Zacarias' controversial move to target the 100 worst performing schools among the more than 600 schools in the district. It found that more than 42 percent of the students in those schools came from families on welfare, compared to 30 percent in a sampling of 465 other schools in the district.

Critics have long complained that the sheer size of L.A. Unified — where

Languages* of L.A. Unified

Language	# of LEP*
Afghan	18
Afrikaans	2
Albanian	1
Native American Languages:	
Cherokee	1
Other Native American	7
Amharic	80
Arabic	394
Armenian	4,923
Assyrian	55
Bengali	243
Bulgarian	39
Burmese	29
Chinese Languages:	
Cantonese	2,206
Chin Chow	252
Mandarin (Putonghua)	257
Taiwanese	32
Toishanese	37
Other Chinese	260
Creole	16
Croatian	18
Czech	13
Danish	1
Dutch	17
Farsi (Persian)	899
Fijian	2
Finnish	9
French	69
German	24
Greek	11
Guamanian (Chamorro)	1
Gujarati	80
Hawaiian	3
Hebrew	220
Hindi	167
Hmong	11
Hungarian	37
Ibo	12
Indonesian	103
Italian	25

the student population is second only to New York City's one million students — makes it unmanageable, but others insist neither size nor the district's complex diversity are the sources of its problems. "Many districts have problems with size," says state Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin, "but they still perform well. Is there magic in size? I don't think so. But I do think when a district becomes dysfunctional, it's harder to reform. It's not impossible, but it is harder."

Eastin and others point to large urban districts they say are doing well, such as Long Beach and San Francisco — both of which have large minority and LEP populations and strong superintendents who have aggressively pressed for improved performance, even tying school performance to administrators' jobs. And she points to small beacons of light in Los Angeles — often charter schools, in poor and not-so-poor communities, where principals, teachers and parents have banded together to dramatically improve their children's education, and their test scores.

Test scores generally in L.A. Unified are among the lowest in the state — well below the 50th percentile which is the national average, with district ninth-graders scoring 25, 35 and 29 in reading, math and language, respectively. The scores at the 100 poorly performing schools identified by Zacarias are beyond the pale. Using the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills and a similar test administered in Spanish, several schools hover in the single digits. Only seven of the 100 schools are in the San Fernando Valley, seat of secession proposals motivated by the poor performance of L.A. schools.

Many say the L.A. schools are unfairly criticized — and that they can be turned around. "Trying to educate a child in an atmosphere that is not conducive to learning is very difficult," says state Senator Teresa Hughes (D-Los Angeles), a former teacher and member of the Senate Education Committee whose district includes parts of South-Central Los Angeles. "We must realize too that the constituency in L.A. County is very fluid. People are constantly moving around, the family is often uprooted, children transferred from school to school. There is no continuity. These are fantastic obstacles put in the way of learning."

Three of the schools on Zacarias' target list are among those served by the highly touted "10 School" program started 10 years ago in some of the district's toughest schools in Watts and South-Central L.A., including six schools cheek-by-jowl with huge, crime-ridden public housing projects. There was a time when all of the 10 probably would have been on the list, but major infusions of money, time and talent were put into the schools, and many have shown phenomenal improvements, including reduced teacher turnover, more parental involvement, higher test scores and reduced school crime. One elementary school next to the infamous Nickerson Gardens public housing project posted third-grade test scores in the 61st percentile (the national average is 50), a far cry from its single-digit figures when the program started. The LEP students, in fact, posted higher scores than their English-speaking counterparts. Highly structured and run by a tough, longtime teacher-administrator, Dr. Theodore Alexander, who also runs the district's magnet school program, the 10 schools have seen results, although critics say the results have been expensive and difficult to replicate district-wide.

For those who work, and learn, in the lowest-performing schools, the stigma can be particularly stinging. "Emotionally, it's hard on the staff to be named the lowest," Cynthia Dugan, principal at the 102nd Street School, which is 19th on the list (on a "worst" to "best" scale of 1-100), told a *Times* reporter. "We know that people will not look at many of the factors we face." — factors such as grinding poverty, child hunger, family breakdown, high transiency and, in some cases, parental drug use. Add to these high teacher and administrator turnover, resulting in a lower per-pupil spending ratio which in turn resulted in protracted litigation in the courts. Many teachers in the lowest performing schools are inexperienced, beginning teachers, and hence lower-paid, which drags down the average spending figure and, critics say, the quality of the children's education.

"What we discovered was that there was no such thing as equity," said Silvia Argueta, a staff attorney with the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), which successfully sued the district in 1985, working out a settlement in 1992 known as the Rodriguez consent decree. She said the district has since made considerable

tudents at Dixie Canyon Elementary school (which recently got air onditioning with the passage of a bond issue. Summer temperatures ere can reach 110 degrees.)

progress in equalizing per-pupil spending from a $500-700 difference to within $100 of other schools, as required by the consent decree.

A major focus of the MALDEF suit, which was joined by numerous other educational and legal services groups, was the district practice of assigning novice teachers at lower salaries to heavily minority schools in poor communities where the primary language was not English. "It has been a practice in the district that must stop," said school board member Barbara Boudreaux, in whose district one-third of the 100 worst performing schools are located. "You will not assign unsatisfactory teachers, marginal teachers, insensitive teachers to one school." She said most of the complaints she receives from parents concern teacher turnover and inconsistent, inferior instruction.

Zacarias, 68, a longtime district teacher and administrator who has the support of teachers and principals in his 100-school effort, agrees that teacher turnover is a major problem for the schools. The new superintendent, who took over the huge district last June, is the son of Mexican immigrants and only the second Latino to serve as superintendent.

Like teachers, administrators and students in the targeted schools, Zacarias flinches at the "worst school" label. "They're not the worst schools," he says. "This is not just about 100 schools needing to improve. Every school has to improve. I personally am focusing on 100 schools, but when I'm through with them I will go on to 100 more schools.

"In many of these schools, 30 to 50 percent of their faculty are new — teachers who for the most part are being hired with emergency credentials. Where are we putting them? In the primary grades in some of the poorer schools." Zacarias has requested additional funding to augment state funding for class-size reduction and other programs to improve teacher training and expand the mentor teacher program. He is also seeking additional resources to expand after-school and Saturday tutoring.

Zacarias says he is also reviewing each low-performing school classroom-by-classroom. "It's amazing that I've found kids who have met or surpassed national norms in reading and math," he said. "Yet I ask if these kids are [classified as] 'gifted,' and in too many cases, the answer has been 'no.'" Gifted programs so common to suburban and many urban schools throughout California are practically nonexistent, Zacarias said, in the 100 most poorly performing schools of L.A. Unified.

Although strongly supportive of bilingual education, Zacarias said not enough attention has been paid in the district to "redesignating" non- or limited-English speakers when they have gained some fluency in English. "In some cases," he said, "schools didn't have bilingual coordinators with enough experience, or they might not have paid that much attention. I've made them focus on the need to redesignate these children, when proper. I'm not suggesting putting a kid in a class they're not ready for ... but we need to find a faster way to transition."

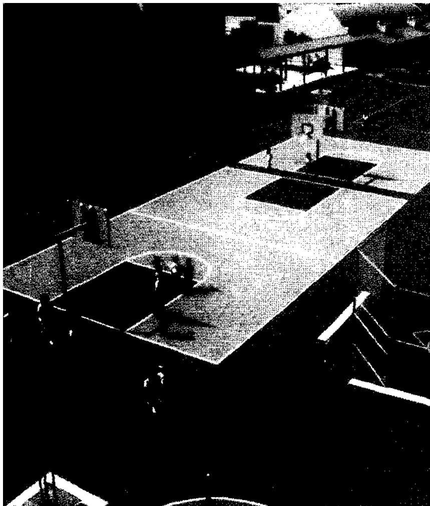
Beyond the issues of size and diversity, critics of district administration say much of the difficulty in L.A. Unified is related to the so-called "site-based management" popular among many district administrators. "School-based management does not work in a district with massive transiency," says one highly placed state educator knowledgeable about the district, who asked not to be identified. "Kids move school to school, and turnover rates can exceed 100 percent." Schools may not utilize the same teaching methods — so-called "whole language," for example, to teach reading in one school, phonics in another — and children moving from school to school become confused.

David Tokovsky, an outspoken

Japanese	186
Javanese	2
Kanjobal	10
Khmer	730
Khmu	2
Korean	3,916
Kurdish	1
Lao	76
Latvian	3
Lithuanian	10
Malay	8
Marshallese	2
Melanesian	2
Mongolian	2
Nepali	6
Norwegian	2
Pashto	56
Philippine Language	
Ilocano	96
Pilipino (Tagalog)	2,233
Visayan (Cebuano)	21
Other Philippine	161
Polish	58
Portuguese	84
Punjabi	291
Rumanian	59
Russian	1,484
Samoan	102
Serbian	16
Serbo-Croatian	30
Sinhalese	17
Slovak	4
Spanish	286,983
Swahili	1
Swedish	5
Thai	471
Tongan	84
Turkish	23
Ukranian	16
Urdu	198
Vietnamese	1,568
Yoruba	5
Others, Not Listed	204
Total LEP*	**309,802**
Total Enrollment	**667,624**

* Primary Languages of K-12 Limited English Proficient Students, 1996-1997

Source: Los Angeles Unified School District


Playground at Gratts Elementary School

Victoria Castro, Board of Education, LAUSD

Dr. Ruben Zacarias, 43rd Superintendent, LAUSD

former social studies teacher who is a member of the district school board, is highly critical of the district's entrenched bureaucracy. He says change is glacial, if it occurs at all, and the L.A. schools generally "are doing a poor job for all students, whether they be LEP, special education, gifted or middle-class," with instructional decisions made haphazardly and without measurable standards and evaluation. "We all need to ... look at what we actually teach and how we measure it. We have 100 schools that have been flatliners [in test scores] for 25 years."

Passage of a major $2.4 billion bond issue last spring will bring much-needed revenue for repairs and construction in L.A. Unified. The optimists in the district — and there are many — say the bond money as well as increasing levels of support and attention to the long-neglected system by politicians and community leaders may be the push that is needed to move the behemoth down the path of significant reform. Mayor Richard Riordan has made the L.A. schools a top priority, and the massive, five-year-old community-based and foundation-funded program called LEARN (the Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructuring Now) says schools adopting the LEARN model — which is voluntary and includes intensive teacher involvement and training — are showing major improvements in student achievement, parental involvement and lowered crime rates. The project is operating in 327 L.A. schools.

"I will not sit here and tell you that it is an easy accomplishment to get 327 schools operating in an exemplary fashion," says LEARN's top executive, Mike Roos, a former Democratic assemblyman who left the Legislature in 1991 for LEARN. "It is almost axiomatic that without a strong principal — a collaborator, a visionary, an entrepreneur who can get community support — the school can't possibly succeed."

And nowhere is the challenge of turning around the L.A. schools more daunting than in the central city. LAUSD school board member Victoria Castro, a former teacher and junior high school principal in East L.A., was born and raised in the district she now represents. "I grew up on an after-school playground. My parents both worked, and there were people there to take care of us. We don't have those services anymore. One of the elementary schools in my district has more than 1,000 students and not one lives in a single-home dwelling. They all live in apartments or motels. It's the closest think you can get to tenement housing in California.

"Southern California is supposed to be grass and yards, and these kids deal with streets, alleys, motels, hourly prostitution, parks that are not safe. On Monday mornings, they have to sweep the sandboxes for syringes. And yet there is some remarkable teaching going on."

Many students in Castro's Second District live near aging, overcrowded schools and must be bused, mostly to the San Fernando Valley. Some elementary schools have 2,000 kids, one middle school has 4,000, and three high schools are on year-round schedules because of overcrowding. "We have children entering kindergarten," she says, "and getting on busses to ride 40-45 minutes."

Increasingly, schools in impoverished areas must be much more than schools. Three-fourths of L.A. Unified students are eligible for free and reduced-price breakfasts and lunches, which may be their only meals of substance. Recognizing the lack of health care for many children, the district has established health clinics at several schools. Increased efforts are being made to involve parents — a key element in any school reform effort — and some schools offer English classes to parents as well as kids.

"You can't separate education from the home and the community," says state Senator Diane Watson (D-Los Angeles), a former teacher and L.A. Unified board member who serves on the Senate Education Committee. "When I was a child welfare and attendance officer [for the district], I would have to go into the homes of the children. I especially remember the case of a kindergarten child the teacher asked me to check on because he smelled of urine. He lived in the back of a house over a garage. I had to step over sleeping bodies. The mother looked like she had overdosed. But that kid would get himself up, get himself to school. I told the teacher whatever time he arrived, she should hug him and nurture him and help him."

Any notion that poor, minority kids in urban school districts have too many strikes against them to learn incenses long-time educators like Marion Joseph, for 12 years a top aide to former state Superintendent of Public Instruction Wilson Riles. Now a vocal member of the state Board of Education, Joseph sighs when asked about L.A Unified.

"Learning to read, spell, write and compute, learning to listen — those are the work of the schools. Those are the things children need to succeed. If because of societal problems, the school cannot do what it is charged with, then someone has to wonder, why have them? Somebody is getting paid huge budgets to accomplish something that cannot be accomplished. I don't think this is true."

"I think these kids can learn," insists Joseph, "if there is a well-thought-out, well-organized, well-run program with trained teachers. There is enough evidence of schools in serious ghetto areas that work."