

## **Pittsburg Schools Post County's Highest Dropout Rate Amid Rising Test Scores**

**By Rick Radin**

**Contra Costa Times**

**Updated: 09/07/2011 05:47:43 PM PDT**

**While Pittsburg's elementary schools made major improvements in state performance tests reported last month, the district posted the lowest graduation and highest dropout rates in Contra Costa.**

**Pittsburg High School and Riverside Continuation High School reported a combined 64.6 percent graduation rate, compared with 74.4 percent statewide, and a 31.2 percent dropout rate for the 2009-10 school year, last in the county in both categories.**

Riverside's 37.8 percent graduation rate contrasted sharply with Pittsburg High's 71.3 percent rate. Testing service errors delayed the release of Academic Performance Index scores from the two schools.

Meanwhile, the city's eight elementary schools jumped an average of 26.5 points in state testing in the 2010-11 school year. Los Medanos Elementary was the only school that reached the state benchmark of 800; it had a score of 875.

Superintendent Linda Rondeau expressed confidence that the high school graduation rates will improve in the district as a result of rising academic standards.

This year, 700 high school students are enrolled in chemistry versus an average of 150 a year for the previous 20 years.

Twice as many students are taking a foreign language class compared with two years ago; ninth-graders are taking biology instead of general science; and many more students are going on to geometry and Algebra II, Rondeau said.

"The more proficient the students are as they reach the secondary level, our responsibility will be to create a situation where they grow and learn at those accelerated rates," she said.

The district also is concerned that some students could be left behind, so it is providing such assistance as online instruction. **(Note: Individual one-on-one attention would be much better.)**

"Obviously, higher expectations bring more challenges, so we're providing safety nets for kids who need more support," she said. **Although the state is using a new method to compute the dropout rate, Pittsburg's rate traditionally has been high, Rondeau said. The district may have not done a good job of designing programs that met the students' needs, she said.**

The new high school, which opened last fall, has improved vocational opportunities -- including robotics, video, and auto and wood shops with state-of-the-art equipment that are providing attractive

alternatives to college prep education. "The issue is to have the maximum amount of opportunity," she said.

Rondeau said she has noticed an enthusiasm for more rigorous instruction among students and parents that she is confident will help the district reduce the dropout rate.

"Students are getting better preparation at the K-8 level, and at some level we're going to get a tipping point where it's going to show up at Pittsburg High School," trustee Vince Ferrante said.

Pittsburg school officials pointed to several factors for the rising scores, including better teaching of skills measured on state tests, a greater interest in academics for younger students, and stronger elementary and middle school academic programs.

Willie Wong, president of the school board, said that elementary school teachers are evaluating test score data and re-teaching skills and concepts where students made mistakes.

"If a particular test answer was selected more often than the right answer, why are the kids picking that answer?" said Wong, a former Pittsburg superintendent. "They may be learning something backward or are not reading the question correctly."

He used as an example a problem where an airplane is flying 3,400 miles, has already flown 360, and the student is asked to compute how far it still must fly.

"We might find that a high percentage of students aren't subtracting the miles already flown -- they're adding them back -- so we can reteach that," he said.

Contact Rick Radin at 925-779-7166.