

Mixed bag for LTUSD on mandated standardized tests

By Kathryn Reed

Students in Bijou Community School's Two-Way Immersion Program scored substantially better on standardized tests than their peers. And they were taking it in Spanish.

In grades 2 and 3 the immersion program has 90 percent of the curriculum delivered in Spanish. Half of the 20 students in each class speak Spanish as their primary language, the other half speak English as their primary language. Kids are chosen by lottery, as opposed to hand picked.



Bijou's TWI students test higher than their peers.
Photo/LTN file

When it comes to the Academic Performance Index, or API, scores show the TWI kids scoring at a 48 proficiency level in English language arts compared to the other second- and third-grade classes at 19 percent. In math, the scores are 73 and 44 percent, respectively. This chart illustrates those results.

With Bijou having a predominately Hispanic student population, the number of English learners is more pronounced here compared to the other elementary schools. However, even South

Tahoe High School has just more than a quarter of its students considered English learners – aka, those who have learned English as a second language.

The statistic that is unknown is how the non-TWI students who speak Spanish as their first language would do on the tests if they were given in Spanish. That might better test comprehension of the subject; while current results may only be showing they lack an understanding of the language.

But state tests don't dig that deep. Instead, all of this testing – still part of President George W. Bush's legacy of No Child Left Behind and President Obama's Race to the Top – calls for all students to be at the proficient or higher level by 2013-14.

It's a goal most educators say was never nor will ever be attainable. The magic number to hit is 800.

"I like assessments to tell me how a kid learns so I can reinforce and re-teach so they are engaged and excited about learning," Lake Tahoe Unified School District Superintendent Jim Tarwater said. "This is their one ticket. If they lose this ticket, it is tough finding a job."

LTUSD, still considered a program improvement district, has implemented policies to follow students so individualized growth or lack of growth is monitored. This contradicts the state and feds which compare one third grade class to the next and so on – making test scores about the grade level and not the particular class or student.

"Some schools, if students do well, they will change your grade. To me that means this test controls everything. I think you should learn more than a test," Tarwater said.

The latest results compared to the previous year:

- Bijou: 2010 – 718; 2011 – 701 = decrease of 17

- Environmental Magnet: 2010 – 939; 2011 – 935 = decrease of 4
- Tahoe Valley: 2010 – 788; 2011 – 808 = increase of 20
- Sierra House: 2010 – 813; 2011 – 826 = increase of 13
- South Tahoe Middle: 2010 – 792; 2011 – 778 = decrease of 14
- South Tahoe High: 2010 – 758; 2011 – 755 = decrease of 3.

“We want growth, but not everyone is going to be in top 5 percent,” Tarwater said. “Overall, we are teaching the standards and hopefully teaching more than that.”

A report is expected to be made to the school board at the Oct. 11 6pm meeting.