Palmdale Elementary School District
California

Superintendent: Jack Gyves
Primary contact: Betty Stiers, assistant superintendent*
School studied: Yucca Elementary
18,180 students, K-12, suburban

District and School Descriptions
Palmdale Elementary School District serves an outer ring suburb of Los Angeles and is about 67 miles north of Los Angeles International Airport. While some residents commute to Los Angeles for work, the parents of many Palmdale students work in the Antelope Valley in the aerospace or service industry. Some others work at Edwards Air Force Base, which is about 50 miles away. The school district has been challenged by rapid growth and high rates of poverty: 71% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Yucca Elementary is a high-poverty Title I school. In 2004-05, about 91% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 47% were English language learners. In 2004-05 testing, Yucca Elementary failed to meet AYP targets for its general population in both reading and math.

Key Findings
• Palmdale has made some progress in both reading and math on state tests. Still, the achievement of subgroups, particularly African American students, Latino students, low-income students, and English language learners has kept the district and many of its schools from meeting adequate yearly progress targets.

• Palmdale is the first district to use Look Before You Leap: A Guide for Selecting Alternative Forms of Governance and Restructuring for PI Year 4 Requirements (2005), created by Dennis Fox of the Southern California Comprehensive Assistance Center (SCCAC). This guide helped the district and four schools in restructuring design a plan specifically tailored to the needs of each school, district and school officials said.

• Fewer than 60 students participated in supplemental educational services in 2004-05, which were offered off-site. Due to transportation issues, it is more convenient for students and parents to have tutoring located at their neighborhood school. In response, the district will provide an after-school tutoring program for 2005-06. This program cannot, however, be paid for with funds set aside for supplemental educational services, because Palmdale has been identified for improvement.

*Other contacts for this case study include Anastacia Arnold, principal, Yucca Elementary; Kelly Kastel, 3rd grade teacher, Yucca Elementary; and Dennis Fox, consultant for the Southern California Comprehensive Assistance Center (SCCAC).
Rapid population growth brought more Title I dollars to Palmdale, but district officials said keeping up with the growth was challenging. Building new schools and hiring staff took time away from efforts to change curriculum and instruction. Now that growth has slowed, district officials are focusing on raising student achievement and meeting AYP targets.

Overall Impact of NCLB

For the past 10 years, Palmdale Elementary School District has grown by about 1,000 students per year. This rapid growth led the district to focus on building schools to accommodate students. As a result, during the early years of No Child Left Behind, district officials said they were scrambling to accommodate the influx of students, and less attention was focused on changing curriculum and instruction to meet the accountability demands of NCLB. As of 2005-06, growth in the suburb has slowed, four schools have entered restructuring implementation under NCLB, and district officials say they are now better able to focus on raising student achievement and meeting other demands of NCLB.

NCLB and Student Achievement

Palmdale Elementary School District has improved steadily on California’s Academic Performance Index (API), going from 621 in 2002-03 to 662 in 2004-05. An API score of 560 was required to meet state accountability targets in 2002-03, and an API score of 590 was required in 2004-05. Based on these API scores, Palmdale has raised student achievement and met state accountability targets.

AYP targets for NCLB have been more challenging for the district, but the percentage of students meeting AYP targets has increased overall. The percentage of students in all subgroups meeting targets during the same time period has also increased. For example, the districtwide passing rate in reading increased by about 7 percentage points, while the districtwide passing rate in math increased by about 10 percentage points. In addition, the subgroups that traditionally have had the most difficulty meeting AYP targets in Palmdale—African American students, Latino students, low-income students, and English language learners (ELLs)—have all increased their passing rates in both reading and math by at least 8 percentage points. These increases have not, however, been large enough for the district to meet AYP targets for subgroups and have not narrowed the achievement gap.

District administrators said they are encouraged by this progress, even though AYP targets have been out of reach in the past. “I see the strides. In time, we can get there,” said Kelly Kastel, a 3rd grade teacher at Yucca Elementary who has been with the district 19 years.

Adequate Yearly Progress and School Improvement

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL AYP STATUS

Palmdale Elementary School District failed to make AYP in 2004-05 and is in year 1 of improvement. Overall, students met the AYP targets in both reading and math; however, subgroup performance kept the district from meeting AYP targets. In reading, African American, Latino, and low-income students, as well as English language learners, fell short of AYP targets. In math, Latino students did make AYP, but African American students, low-income students, and English language learners did not.

Of the district’s 25 Title I schools, 4 are in year 2 of school improvement, 8 are in corrective action, and 5 are in restructuring. A total of 22 schools failed to meet AYP targets for 2004-05. Of these 22 schools, 9 failed to meet AYP targets based on the performance of subgroups alone. The rest also failed to meet AYP due to the general population in math or reading or both. As
in the district as a whole, African American, Latino, low-income, and ELL students were the most likely subgroups to have failed to meet AYP targets.

**DISTRICT IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES**

The district and state have several written school improvement policies. Prominent elements of these policies include a recently adopted reading text, an English language development (ELD) curriculum, districtwide language arts and mathematics assessments administered at regular intervals during the school year, a pacing guide for reading, and focused staff development for principals and teachers. While not directly in response to NCLB, these policies are aligned with NCLB and Reading First requirements and are designed to help the district meet NCLB targets, said Assistant Superintendent Betty Stiers, noting that the policies are still in the process of being implemented in schools. The slowing of enrollment growth in 2005-06 will allow the district to focus more fully on implementing existing policies, Stiers said, which should lead to faster growth in student achievement.

**RESTRUCTURING STRATEGIES**

The four Palmdale schools placed in restructuring in 2004-05 all face challenges of high poverty and lack of consistent principal leadership. For example, when new principal Anastacia Arnold first came to Yucca Elementary in 2004-05, she said she found a school that had been neglected and, as a result, had student behavior problems, run-down facilities, lack of accountability systems, and problems with teacher morale. Without leadership, she said, the staff had become demoralized, and each teacher was working in isolation. “There was lack of vision and hope. There was total system failure,” she recalled.

In the spring of 2004-05, in response to restructuring under NCLB, the district piloted Look Before You Leap: A Guide for Selecting Alternative Forms of Governance and Restructuring for PI Year 4 Requirements (2005). This decision-making process, created by Dennis Fox of the Southern California Comprehensive Assistance Center, takes administrators through a series of activities designed to help them develop a major restructuring plan or select an alternative form of governance that will best meet the needs of the school.

*Look Before You Leap* assumes that school governance consists of six components:

- **Organization**—the ways people and offices are interrelated, i.e. the organizational charts of the district and school
- **Systems**—the routine ways things are done at the school
- **Policies**—formal written general guidelines for teachers and administrators
- **Procedures**—established routines for specific tasks
- **Practices**—informal habits of behavior
- **Personnel**—the people who work in the district and the schools

The guide then leads staff through a series of activities to address eight “critical questions,” which ultimately lead to a major restructuring plan or the selection of an alternative form of governance for that particular school. The eight critical questions are:

- What evidence indicates that the school and/or specified subgroups are not making AYP?
- What evidence indicates that the school and/or specified subgroups are making AYP?
• What evidence indicates that the school’s governance may be impeding the AYP of the school and/or specified subgroups?

• Which components of the school’s governance may be impeding the AYP of the school and/or specified subgroups?

• What changes have been made in the school’s governance during the previous five years, and how have they affected the AYP of the school and/or specified subgroups?

• What changes in the school’s governance must occur if the school and/or specified subgroups are to make AYP?

• Why do you think these proposed changes in the school’s governance will contribute to the AYP of the school and/or specified subgroups?

• Which alternative form of governance or restructuring plan will best meet the school’s needs?

The first two questions involve staff examining testing and classroom data involving student achievement. The next three ask staff to evaluate the school’s current and past governance structures—organization, systems, policies, procedures, practices, and personnel—and determine whether these structures have promoted or impeded student academic achievement. The last three help the school develop its restructuring plan or select an alternative form of governance. Generally, it takes a full day to train administrators to use the process. Implementing the process with district and school staff may take longer and may happen in a series of meetings. To discuss personnel issues, for example, several additional meetings may be needed, and meeting attendees will need to be chosen carefully so that issues of confidentiality are respected.

The guide is designed to promote constructive planning rather than punitive consequences. “This is not a process of playing ‘gotcha.’ We’re not looking for a fall guy,” said Fox, who created the guide. Instead, he said, “We want to make sure we honor the people at the school during the process. Nobody wakes up in the morning and thinks, ‘I want to go to work today and screw up as much as possible.’” As a result, he said, in addition to generating ideas about changes that will improve the school, the guide helps identify, preserve, and reinforce things that are working well at the school.

After Fox and colleagues train a district team, which usually consists of district administrators, the team takes school and district staff through the process. At Palmdale, after the central office leadership team received training, they trained principals of schools undergoing restructuring. Principals, in turn, went through the process with their school staff, who ultimately collaborated on the restructuring plan.

Central office staff gained a great deal from using Look Before You Leap, Stiers said. “Many of the policies and procedures were problematic at the district level,” she said, explaining that central office staff hadn’t fully realized this until they looked closely at the student achievement data and how students were affected by policies. For example, the focus on opening new schools and the high turnover of principals had resulted in lack of continuity in leadership.

At Yucca Elementary, Look Before You Leap gave Arnold the opportunity to start over with staff and build hope for the future. “That’s what saved last year,” Arnold said.

The process of using the guide was not without challenges, both Stiers and Arnold admitted. “The toughest part was looking at the brutal truth about student achievement,” Stiers said, noting that this was especially difficult for staff who had been working diligently in the district a long time and felt responsible that AYP was not met. “Finally, you have to say, ‘This is the current condition; we have to move forward.’”
Yucca staff had mixed initial responses, Arnold said, ranging from fear and blaming to a sense that the process would just create another meaningless school improvement plan. Going through the process helped dispel these initial negative reactions, she said. “It gives a framework for all teachers to participate and takes the excuses away.” Ultimately, Arnold said the participation of both district and school staff helped teachers buy into the restructuring plan that resulted. “We were held responsible, but the district was also being held accountable. That helped break down resistance at my school,” she explained. “We could see that we were all in this together with the ultimate goal of improving student achievement.”

The restructuring plans at Palmdale’s five schools in this phase fall under the federal option of “undertaking any other major restructuring of the school’s governance that produces fundamental reform.” The plans did not consider replacing principals because the principals had already been replaced within the previous two years, Stiers said. Staff replacement was also not considered because of the teacher contract and the difficulty of recruiting new teachers, she added.

At Yucca Elementary, part of the restructuring plan is to actually implement some existing policies. For example, teachers will get more professional development on the district’s reading program and on policies for ELL students. The school’s Reading First coach is providing much of the English/language arts professional development on-site. While in the past, teachers examined the data generated from reading and math tests, in 2005-06 all teachers have more staff time devoted to using this data to group students and collaborate on instruction. This collaboration occurs within newly organized grade-level teams that meet three times a month, as well as in the school’s traditional monthly staff meetings.

Yucca has also seen some brand new initiatives for 2005-06. The school added all-day kindergarten rather than relying on half-day instruction. In addition, a leadership team of administrators and teachers now oversees many school operations rather than leaving this to the principal alone. Arnold noted that this leadership team has already improved communication among staff members and has increased buy-in for the school’s restructuring plans.

The district has also stepped up to support the school as part of the restructuring plan, Arnold said. The school now has textbooks, paper, and other materials for all students. Prior to restructuring, Arnold said, staff felt neglected by central office and referred to themselves as “stepchildren.” Arnold said she told her staff that because of the restructuring plan, “You are not stepchildren anymore. You have to let that go.” Arnold said that over the past year she and her staff have come together, accepted the support of the central office, and begun the slow process of rebuilding.

**Testing Issues**

District officials said the staff is making use of multiple assessments to plan and improve instruction, such as the state tests, the assessments that come with Reading First, and assessments that accompany reading and math texts. “Looking at subgroups is a positive part of NCLB,” Stiers noted, explaining that teachers and principals are encouraged to take this approach to analyzing all tests. At Yucca Elementary, teacher Kelly Kastel said this test information is used to create flexible groups and to plan teaching strategies.

Stiers said, however, that teachers may have reached a limit on the amount of data they can process and incorporate into classroom decision making. For 2005-06, the district is adopting a new tutoring intervention. The program recommends a new test to track student achievement. “It appeared to me that the assessments we’re using already measured those skills,” Stiers said, explaining that she decided not to require teachers to add these assessments to the list of required tests.
Impact of NCLB on Curriculum and Instruction

GENERAL CHANGES IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

In 2001-02, California required districts to choose one of two reading texts. Palmdale chose Houghton-Mifflin. While not directly related to NCLB, this adoption was aimed at raising reading achievement and meeting AYP targets. This curricular change was consistent with Reading First, which came to the district in 2004-05.

Not all schools or all teachers followed the new curriculum, and although staff development was available, not all teachers chose to participate, district officials said. For example, at Yucca Elementary, when Arnold came on board and asked to review teachers’ lesson plans, she said, “It was very eye-opening to me.” She explained that it was evident that the teachers still did not fully understand the components of the explicit direct instruction in the reading program, the pacing of the program, or the role of student performance data. To be fair, Arnold said professional development hadn’t been adequate for some teachers, and there had not been consistent leadership to monitor the implementation of the program.

While Stiers said the district is focusing a great deal on reading this year, math is also benefiting from some of the changes being made in reading. For example, inspired by the frequent assessment in reading, teachers are administering math assessments every six weeks and using these assessments to plan and improve math instruction. Palmdale also uses a state-adopted math text. But unlike reading, there is no districtwide pacing guide in math that keeps all teachers on the same lesson each day and ensures that all skills are taught.

CHANGES IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION FOR SUBGROUPS

The achievement of African American students, while improving, continues to lag behind that of the general population in Palmdale. To address the problem, one district principal is working extra days on a project called “Closing the Achievement Gap,” Stiers said. The project includes a committee of principals, assistant principals, and district office staff. For 2005-06, under the guidance of the lead principal, the committee will plan staff development for principals. This staff development will then be passed on to teachers. The work is in the early phases, Stiers said, emphasizing that the district is making a “long-term commitment” to raising achievement for African American students.

English Language Learners

The Palmdale School District has a master plan for English language learners, intended to provide clear direction to district staff about programs for these students. This plan describes the services available to ELLs, which are designed to develop fluency in speaking, reading, and writing, as well as to enhance student self-esteem and promote cross-cultural understanding, Stiers said. Palmdale offers a variety of classroom settings for English language learners. These settings include English language mainstream, which consists of instructing in English only; structured English immersion, which provides instruction primarily in English but includes support for ELLs; alternative bilingual education, which delivers most instruction in the student’s native language with the goal of transitioning the student to English; and dual immersion, which offers students the opportunity to learn in both English and Spanish. State law requires that the district consider parental preferences and state testing results when placing students.

The state requires all classrooms with ELL students to set aside instructional time for English language development, even for those students in mainstream settings. This instruction should be specifically for ELL students, so teachers must group students and conduct several activities simultaneously in the classroom. The district has provided professional development in the use of district-adopted ELD materials and strategies to help all teachers learn to use this time well, Stiers said.
Despite having these plans for ELL students, district officials said the plans have not been fully implemented in all schools. Stiers said that when the new principal came to Yucca Elementary, for example, many staff members were unaware of the district plan for ELLs. In 2005-06 that plan is being implemented under the guidance of the principal, the assistant principal (who has a strong background in ELD instruction), and the district biliteracy department.

**NCLB School Choice**

All 17 schools that are required to offer choice in Palmdale have done so, but only 11 students have specifically used NCLB to change schools, Stiers said. “Most students and most parents like to stay in neighborhood schools,” she said, adding that the choices of schools are limited in Palmdale since most district schools are in NCLB improvement.

In addition, it may be impractical for some parents to send their children to a school farther from home. At Yucca Elementary, for example, Arnold observed, “Fifty to sixty percent of my parents don’t have a car.” She speculated that these parents would have more difficulty participating in after-school activities and parents’ meetings if their children were bussed to a school using NCLB’s choice option.

**Supplemental Educational Services**

Fewer than 60 students participated in supplemental educational services in 2004-05, Stiers reported. Although about 30 providers on the state list offered to serve Palmdale, most required a minimum of 20 to 30 students, Stiers said. She explained that this meant several providers did not meet their minimum number of students and did not follow through with tutoring. For 2005-06, the number of students participating has increased to over 110.

While Stiers said she would like students to get tutoring, she was not always certain providers were well qualified. For example, one provider questioned the need to have tutors fingerprinted, even though this is a requirement for district employees and volunteers, she reported. Another provider sent its staff on unannounced visits to schools, attempting to recruit students for its supplemental educational services program. District officials contacted the company and asked that the practice be discontinued.

In order to provide on-site tutoring, Palmdale has resorted to starting its own after-school program. Because the entire Palmdale district is in improvement, it will not be able to use SES funds to support the program, but will use general funds. The after-school program will consist of Voyager Passport, a supplementary reading program approved by the state of California, and Reading First. Palmdale teachers will use this research-based program after school with groups of 6 to 12 struggling readers, said 3rd grade teacher Kastel, who will train teachers and coordinate the program at Yucca Elementary.

**Teacher Qualifications, Support, and Professional Development**

**HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS**

Of Palmdale’s 1,200 teachers, 77% are “highly qualified” according to state definitions. The district has had difficulty attracting highly qualified teachers to Palmdale, Stiers said. Now that student population growth has slowed, the district will not need to hire so many new teachers each year. Stiers expects the district to be able to meet the NCLB deadline for having 100% of staff highly qualified.

Even so, staffing schools will not be easy, Stiers said. Not all highly qualified teachers are well-prepared to teach in high-poverty schools, she observed. “Highly qualified according to NCLB is having the appropriate credentials. In my opinion that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re highly effective teachers,” she explained.
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Palmdale has always offered professional development for teachers, but district officials said that since NCLB, this professional development has focused more on academics. Particular emphases include training teachers to use state-approved curricular materials and helping them to become highly qualified. The professional development offered is a mix of districtwide and on-site activities. The teacher calendar requires two days of professional development before the start of the school year. In 2005-06, for example, the district used these days to provide training on the newly adopted science text. Three additional days during the year are state funded and are optional for teachers. The district typically does a needs assessment and offers a variety of workshops based on the needs of students and staff, Stiers said.

In addition, schools have ongoing professional development offered on-site. Schools with Reading First grants have reading coaches who regularly model lessons in classrooms. The district also expects principals and assistant principals to visit each classroom every week and advise teachers on ways to improve instruction. Grade-level meetings and staff meetings are held regularly. These meetings afford administrators an opportunity to provide additional professional development.

PARAPROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AND SUPPORT

Palmdale has 30 Title I paraprofessionals, and 100% are highly qualified, according to district records. One of the district’s biggest challenges is finding paraprofessionals to work with special education students. For example, in mid-October of 2005, Yucca Elementary still had a Title I paraprofessional position open that focused on working with students with disabilities who were included in general education classrooms. “We can’t find a highly qualified person. It’s impeding [these students’] learning and the learning of everyone in the classroom,” Arnold said.

Funding and Costs

Over the past five years, Palmdale has cut $24 million from the budget, Stiers said, explaining that cuts were due primarily to California’s state budget shortfalls. Title I funding has stabilized at about $6.5 million for both 2004-05 and 2005-06. Even so, Title I funds are not sufficient to fund all the support needed for students to meet AYP targets, Stiers said. Instead, many programs are supported by state funds targeted at improving schools identified by the state testing system.

Capacity Issues

During the early years of NCLB, Stiers said Palmdale experienced rapid growth and changes in district and site administration. “During that time of rapid growth, great attention was given to housing students out of necessity, with curriculum and instruction taking a back seat,” Stiers said. There was also a change in district leadership. The superintendent who had been with the district for about a decade left the district in 2003, and other key central office administrators left as well. Principals also turned over during this time period. For example, over the past six years, three of the schools currently in restructuring have had four principals. The fourth school in restructuring has had three principals. This churning made implementing new programs difficult. “We’d start a new program and then by the time the principal became knowledgeable about the school and the program, the principal left,” Stiers said.

Now that the population growth has slowed and the central office has stabilized, district officials said they hoped that principals and other staff would stay put for a while. “We were promised that the new principal would stay at least five years,” Kastel said, explaining that this time the district was able to hire a principal with experience in working in high-poverty schools and whose previous schools had shown academic growth on standardized tests.

Changes in principals were especially demoralizing to school staff at Yucca Elementary, Principal Arnold said. Third-grade teacher Kastel confirmed this impression. “Before our new prin-
principal, we had lots of principals just coming through,” she said, explaining that the staff knew one principal was due to retire just one year after he was assigned to their school. “We felt they were kind of dumped on us. The kids’ behavior went out of control, and the grounds weren’t kept up.”

**Reading First**

In Palmdale, nine schools have Reading First grants. The grant activities are well aligned with state and district reading policies, Stiers said. As a result, the district has expanded some elements of Reading First. “We’re implementing districtwide assessments in both language arts and mathematics along with a pacing guide [in reading], and an online student-based reporting system. Although we’re getting some resistance to change,” she said, “what we are doing is clearly outlined in the state framework.” Reading First, she explained, has given the central office the basis to implement policies districtwide that were already in place at several schools.

Reading First overlaps with district and state policies in that it uses the officially adopted state texts and follows a pacing guide that ensures that teachers throughout the district are teaching the same reading content each day. Schools that have Reading First grants have additional support from an on-site Reading First coach.

At Yucca Elementary, which has a grant, Arnold praised the structure offered by Reading First, especially the uniform pacing, embedded ongoing assessments, and the additional support and training the Reading First coach gives all staff members. At first, Arnold said, teachers were overwhelmed by the new curriculum, which they felt was too scripted. Over time, however, she said teachers gained knowledge and competence with the many components of Reading First. This year through Reading First, she said many teachers are better able to diagnose students’ specific academic needs and provide effective instruction.

**Data File—Palmdale Elementary School District**

**Location:** California  
**Type:** Suburban

**Number of Schools**

- Total: 28
- Elementary: 22
- Middle/junior high: 5
- Other: 1

**Number of Title I schools:** 25

**Student Enrollment and Demographics**

- Total enrollment: 18,180
- Latino: 55%  
- White: 21%  
- African American: 20%  
- Asian: 2%  
- American Indian: 1%  
- Other: 2%

- Low-income students: 71%  
- English language learners: 26%  
- Students with disabilities: 12%
Teachers
Total number of teachers: 1,200
Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 77%

Paraprofessionals
Total number of Title I instructional paraprofessionals: 30
Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 100%

Total Number That Did Not Make AYP Based on 2004-05 Testing
Title I and non-Title I schools that did not make AYP, including those in improvement, restructuring, or corrective action: 22

Number of Title I Schools in Improvement, Restructuring, or Corrective Action

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