

Uphill climb for schools

Progress recorded in Fresno Unified, but there is still a long way to go.

Saturday, Feb. 28, 2009

A new study confirms the success the Fresno Unified School District has had in boosting test scores in recent years. The district continues to lag behind the state average, but it is gaining ground. That's a reason to cheer.

But the numbers, contained in a study from the Brookings Institution released Wednesday, also point to improvements that still need to be made. It's an uphill climb for many schools in Fresno, where poverty and other factors conspire to make the job of teaching and learning much more difficult than is the case elsewhere.

In fact, the percentage of students who qualify for free school lunches -- the standard barometer of poverty used in schools -- in Fresno Unified rose from 62% in 2000, the earliest year in the study, to 82% in 2007.

Improving test scores in that milieu is impressive, and we hope the trend continues.

Other trends in education are less reassuring. A new study by the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at California State University, Sacramento, shows the state is slipping badly when it comes to preparing students for higher education and getting them a college degree.

California ranks third in the nation in the percentage of residents 65 and older with a two-year associate degree or higher. That's a reflection of the emphasis on higher education that led to California's prominence beginning in the late 1950s. But the state ranks only 29th for those ages 25-34 with similar academic achievements.

That slippage is more troubling because the numbers are even worse in the fastest growing regions of the state, including the Valley.

Only about one in six working-age adults in the Valley have at least a bachelor's degree. That contrasts sharply with the more than 40% of those in the San Francisco Bay Area who hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

It gets worse. The Valley lags well behind the state average in the number of high school students who complete the required curriculum for admission to the University of California and the California State University systems.

California has done an admirable job of enrolling eighth-graders in algebra, ranking third in the nation in that category. But the state ranks only 45th in the number of students who go on to enroll in advanced math and science classes.

All of that directly affects the ability of the state to be competitive in a global, 21st century economy. We used to understand that better in this state. California once had the finest public schools and universities in the nation, and the vitality of the Golden State's economy was the clearest proof of that. Now, with the economy in trouble, too many Californians have abandoned the emphasis on good schools that once powered the state to the top.

The price of that neglect is a slipping economy and a lower standard of living for everyone.

The rise in test results in Fresno Unified in the past seven years is evidence that we can do better. The grim numbers on college preparation and attendance are evidence that we must.