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**New Experience For Some San Diego Schools Students And Their Teachers**

**By Patricia Hawke**

This July, Annie Santana, a Spanish teacher at Mission Bay High School, part of the San Diego schools, departed the city and headed for the island of Robinson Crusoe, Chile. In the seventh year of her career, Santana joined the Fulbright teacher exchange program.

For one year, Santana will teach English as a second language at a Chilean school on the island; but her students will not be losing her. A Chilean teacher will be replacing Santana at Mission Bay. While both teachers are immersing themselves into their new cultures, the students in both countries also will be exposed through their teachers to a new cultural experience and another country.

Both teachers will have many challenges to face, since there are many differences between the cultures. Chilean classrooms, for example, are smaller in size than those in the San Diego schools. The culture-driven relationships between teacher and student are much closer in Chile, as well.

Santana initiated the contact with the Fulbright teacher exchange program. She believed that she was ready to advance to the next level of cross-cultural experiences by teaching abroad. Santana thoroughly researched the available options. Many did not meet her needs, since she would have to give up her teaching position with the San Diego schools. The Fulbright program best fit her needs, since the exchange is only for one year and an exchange teacher will take her place, allowing her to retain her position with the San Diego schools.

Santana chose Chile, because it is more economically stable than other Latin American countries. To prepare for her trip to Chile, she read the "House of Spirits", by Chilean author Isabel Allende. The book aptly portrays the culture in Chile, which is largely influenced by the many German immigrants over the years.

Before leaving in July, Santana remarked of her interest in experiencing the differences between the cultures of the U.S. and Chile. She also was excited to see how Chile differs from other Latin American cultures, of which she is familiar from her own Mexican heritage. She also was looking forward to seeing how school operations differ from the San Diego schools, as well as societal norms and the general day-to-day routines.

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Other differences that Santana and her students back in the San Diego schools will experience are the Chilean customs and the difference between the Spanish known and taught by Santana and Chilean Spanish, which has a different accent, slang and word usage.

Santana is scheduled to return to the United States and the San Diego schools in July 2007. Until then, she plans to communicate with her family, friends, the Chilean teacher, and her San Diego schools' students by way of the Internet. She wants everyone, especially her San Diego schools' students, to enjoy her adventure with her. It is a great opportunity for them to experience life outside San Diego.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in–depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. For more information on San Diego schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk–12.com/California/San–Diego/index.html>

### **San Diego Schools Closing Gap In Math**

**By Patricia Hawke**

As the San Diego schools graduating class of 2007 begin their senior year, school district superintendents across San Diego County are celebrating. The San Diego County Schools announced in September that, as of the class of 2006, the gap in passing the crucial math portion of the state exit exam is nearly closed between black/Latino and white/Asian students.

The county school report represented three years worth of student testing. The results break a long–standing pattern of lagging scores for black and Latino students.

Across the nation, as well as in the San Diego schools, gaps have long been evident between races in many academic measures, such as SAT scores, dropout rates, and college prep course enrollment.

There are many theories as to why the gap exists. Some believe high–achieving minority students are condemned by their peers as "acting white", while others believe that racism is built into the institution to discourage minorities from enrolling in rigorous courses. It is even believed that predominantly low–income, minority schools generally employ inexperienced or uncredentialed teachers.

Whatever the problem, it seems the San Diego schools and other districts in the county are resolving it. About three years ago, 42 school district superintendents, including the San Diego schools, pledged to help black and Latino students bring their math skills up to par. The Superintendents' Achievement Gap Task Force closed the gap by using teacher training, prep courses, increased teaching time for struggling students, and a symposia for county educators to share techniques and results. A variety of methods were employed to ensure students had every opportunity to succeed.

By class of 2006 graduation day, 92.3 percent of blacks and Latinos had passed the test, and 98.5 percent of whites and Asians had passed. When the class of 2006 first took the exam two years ago, 65 percent of blacks and Latinos passed the math portion, with 90 percent of whites and Asians passing it.

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The math portion of the California High School Exit Exam covers middle school math and some algebra. A score of at least 55 percent must be achieved to pass the exam. Students first take the exam in their sophomore year and have numerous chances in their junior and senior years to retake the exam. The test was first administered in 2001, but the requirement to pass or not receive a high school diploma was implemented with the class of 2006.

Passing the math portion is of particular concern to the San Diego schools, where 43 percent of its students fall into this lagging behind category. Latino children represent its largest racial or ethnic group.

San Diego schools Superintendent Carl Cohn pointed out the importance of this test. He said it means the difference between a lifetime of unemployment and/or incarceration and a successful lifestyle for San Diego schools students. "It makes all the difference in the world," stated Cohn. "The test is genuinely high stakes."

The National Center for Education Statistics underscores the San Diego schools superintendent's

remarks. It reports that, if a student enrolls in algebra in the eighth grade, the chances that student will apply to a four-year college almost doubles.

With all the good results for the county's class of 2006, 1,207 students were denied diplomas, because they did not pass the math portion of the exit exam. Thus, for the San Diego schools, a gap is still a gap. San Diego schools officials acknowledge that more work needs to be done to bring blacks and Latinos' pass rates up within the San Diego schools.

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