

## DAILY BREEZE



Brad Graverson — Staff Photographer

Hawthorne High School is the only one in the South Bay or Harbor Area to offer the International Baccalaureate curriculum.

# Centinela Valley high school students' scores rank near the bottom in county

**BY ROB KUZNIA** — STAFF WRITER

PUBLISHED MARCH 9, 2014

**T**he tiny Centinela Valley Union High School District employs one of the most expensive superintendents in the state of California, if not the nation.

And the district is spending nearly \$200 million to provide state-of-the-art facilities at the three high schools it serves: Lawndale, Leuzinger and Hawthorne.

But the district's test scores — while on the rise — remain the lowest among all 80 school districts in Los Angeles County. Its dropout rate — while improving — now sits at 24 percent according to the latest available figures from the state. This means about one out of every four students who starts ninth grade in the district stops attending school before graduating. The countywide average dropout rate for high schools

is 15 percent. At the Los Angeles Unified School District, it's 20 percent.

Still, the story of Centinela Valley's academic progress is multifaceted. In summary, the district, under the leadership of Jose Fernandez — whose total compensation ballooned from \$286,000 in 2010 to \$663,000 last year — has made some academic strides, though not enough to lift the district out of the basement on many measures.

Fernandez, who took the helm in 2008, did not respond to a request for comment. But under his watch, the district has made gains on test scores, graduation rates, college readiness, attendance, the performance of English learners and the number of students taking Advanced Placement courses, among other things.

## DAILY BREEZE

It also has launched several academies — schools within schools — designed to spark student interest in careers such as engineering, marine science, criminal justice, environment and culinary arts. Last year, it was recognized by the state for linking coursework to career pathways.

Hawthorne High recently became the only high school in the South Bay or Harbor Area to offer a curriculum called International Baccalaureate, an accelerated program that rivals Advanced Placement and whose most successful graduates can enter college as sophomores.

Although controversial, the new facilities bankrolled by two voter-approved bond measures have been a boon to a population of students whose level of poverty can be staggering.

Teachers union President Jack Foreman says students at Hawthorne High use the brand-new media center as a place to study until 8 p.m., in many cases because it beats trying to do homework in cramped apartments.

“Half of these kids are living in very unstable homes — crazy living situations,” he said. “There were two brothers last year who told me, ‘We’re back living behind the tattoo parlor.’”

The Lennox apartment of a family he visited was even more discouraging, Foreman said.

“It was worse than things I’ve seen in Third World countries,” he said. “You walk in and there’s some little tiny kitchen like in the hallway. ... No central room to sit, it was dark. Oh, God — just run down. A lot of our kids are coming from places like this.”

Although the district’s test scores have risen in five years, they remain a sore subject. The district’s 2013 Academic Performance Index score — a number from 200 to 1,000 assigned to schools every fall based on the performance of students on a handful of springtime tests — rose from 626 when Fernandez first arrived to 680 last year.

### LOWEST SCORE IN COUNTY

And yet, the 680 figure is not only the lowest districtwide score in Los Angeles County, it’s 19 points below the next

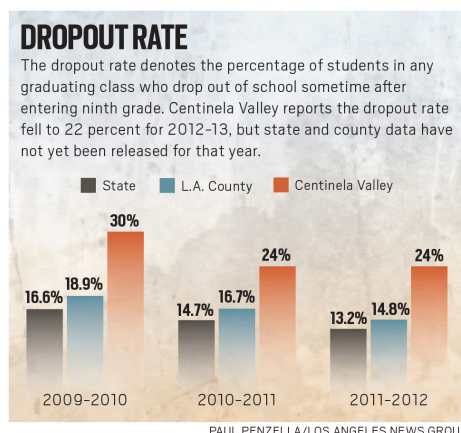
lowest-scoring district, Compton Unified. In fact, Centinela Valley’s API score has been the lowest of all 80 districts since at least 2009, with the exception of 2012, when it crept up to 78th

before dropping back to last, according to the California Department of Education.

(The county technically serves 81 districts, but the lowest performing of them — the Los Angeles County Office of Education — isn’t considered a regular school district as it caters to high-risk students: juvenile offenders, pupils with disabilities and potential dropouts.)

In fairness, educators say high school districts are at an inherent disadvantage when it comes to API scores because elementary students generally perform better on tests than older students.

“I would strongly argue that the L.A. County ranking is way too simplistic and definitely does not provide a fair and accurate picture of CV’s academic situation,” said John Schwada, a public relations consultant hired in late February by the district, about



## DAILY BREEZE

three weeks after the Daily Breeze published the initial story about Fernandez’s compensation. “The L.A. County ranking compares apples and oranges.”

Even so, there are five high school districts in Los Angeles County, and Centinela Valley currently ranks last among them. And of the 67 high school districts across California with a 2013 API score, Centinela Valley ranks 65th, ahead of King City and Upper Lake. (A handful of high school districts had no score.)

Schwada also noted that Lawndale High School’s scores fall in the top 50 percent when held against individual schools across the state with similar demographics. Hawthorne High falls in the top 40 percent among like high schools; Leuzinger, the bottom 40 percent.

He also pointed out that, although the district’s dropout rate as a whole is higher than LAUSD’s, the corresponding figure for individual schools paints a more favorable picture. Lawndale High’s dropout rate of 5.6 percent is better than nearly 60 percent of all high schools in Los Angeles County. He also noted that Hawthorne High’s rate of 18.6 percent is better than 21 percent of the county’s high schools, including Gardena High.

In any event, Allan Mucerino, who in the fall of 2012 became the district’s assistant superintendent of educational services, said the district’s overall API ranking among school districts in Los Angeles County is all the more reason to redouble efforts to improve further.

“I don’t want to make excuses,” he said. “I think that’s just a message that we need to continue to improve

and do better. It’s why I’ve chosen to work here, because there is a lot of room for growth and work to be done, and, as a result of that, the rewards are that much greater.”

### BIG CHANGES

Foreman is adamant that schools in Centinela Valley have improved significantly over the past four years.

“Leuzinger (High) is a transformed school,” he said. “I mean, that place was a hell-hole before.”

The most easily recognizable change at that school at 4118 Rosecrans

Ave., in Lawndale, is the campus itself. Bankrolled by funds from a pair of voter-approved construction bonds worth a combined \$196 million, the district replaced half of Leuzinger’s 80-year-old campus with a state-of-the-art wing of classrooms.

Educators say discipline problems there are way down as well. And Leuzinger is no longer at the bottom of the heap on test scores.

Some, however, attribute the school’s aberrant API score spike of 56 points in a single year in 2011-12 to a corresponding sudden near quadrupling of the student population at the nearby Loyde Continuation School, reportedly to ensure that the tests of poor-performing students would not take be reflected in Leuzinger’s scores.

“A lot of the API score comes from the 10th grade CAHSEE score,” said a district employee who asked not to be named for fear of reprisal, referring to the California High School Exit Exam. “There was a big sweep of 10th-graders sent to Loyde. Those kids should not have been sent.”

**There are five high school districts in Los Angeles County, and Centinela Valley ranks last among them.**

## DAILY BREEZE

Mucerino — who was not in Centinela Valley at the time — says while he has heard the same accusation, he believes the number of students short on credits was just unusually large that year. However, the following year, enrollment at the continuation school dropped closer to normal, and Leuzinger’s test scores plunged by 25 points.

Despite Centinela Valley’s academic struggles, plenty of the district’s students do go on to thrive after high school.

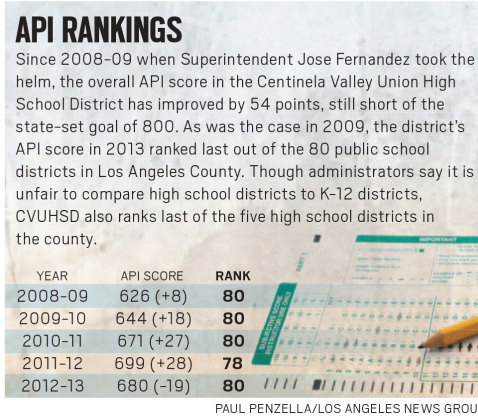
Genesis Gutierrez, the 2013 valedictorian at Lawndale High School, earned a full-ride scholarship to Cal State Long Beach, where she is already on pace to graduate early. Four of the other top students all went to

either Brown University, UC Santa Barbara or UCLA.

“I loved the teachers, they were amazing,” she said. But she added: “It was just very sad that at Lawndale High School, sometimes we would have textbooks that were outdated, mismatched, tearing, ripping, etcetera.”

She lamented that students had to procure their own novels for English class, and the science labs — due to the massive construction under way — were held in bungalow classrooms.

“We had to share goggles and lab aprons,” she said. “It’s not the teachers’ fault by any means, it’s just that there wasn’t the funding.”



# DAILY BREEZE

