

California Comprehensive Center (CA CC) High-Performing, High-Need School Profile

Prepared by CA CC partner, the American Institutes for Research

Watts Learning Center Los Angeles Unified School District

Overview

Watts Learning Center (WLC) is a small independent charter elementary school in the Los Angeles Unified School District. The school was established in 1997 with the primary mission of serving socioeconomically disadvantaged African American students, although the school has recently expanded recruiting efforts to include more Hispanic students and English learners. The school's vision statement is that "The Watts Learning Center will be a world-class, child-centered elementary school with strong ties to families and the community." Since the 1999-2000 school year (the first year for which data are available), WLC's API score has risen 248 points (see Exhibit 4 for more information on the school's achievement over time).



WLC has gradually expanded the range of grades offered, and currently enrolls kindergarten through grade 6. In 2007-08, over 250 students from kindergarten through grade 5 were enrolled at the school (see Exhibit 3), with more than double that number of children on the wait list. Ninety-five percent of the student body is African American and 82 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (see Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 1. School API Rankings* 2004-05 Through 2007-08

	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
Statewide ranking	7	7	8	8
Similar Schools ranking	10	10	10	10

*Statewide rankings range from 1 to 10, with 1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest. Similar Schools rankings compare an individual school's API to 100 schools in its comparison group. Schools are divided into 10 equal groups from the lowest (1) to the highest (10).

Source: Academic Performance Index, 2004-05 through 2007-08

Exhibit 2. Student Characteristics, 2007-08

	School	District	Statewide Elementary School Average
African American	95%	10%	7%
American Indian	0%	0%	2%
Asian	0%	4%	9%
Filipino	0%	2%	3%
Hispanic	4%	74%	47%
Pacific Islander	0%	0%	1%
White	0%	9%	31%
Other race/ethnicity	0%	1%	5%
Eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	82%	69%	55%
English learners (ELs)	0%	34%	29%
Special education	6%	11%	11%

Sources: California Basic Educational Data Systems (CBEDS); Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program; and Free/Reduced Meals Program & CalWORKS Data Files, 2007-08.

Overview (continued)

While their class sizes are fairly comparable, the teachers at WLC have less experience and are less likely to have full credentials compared with the average elementary school in the state. However, the school also employs more administrative and paraprofessional staff than average (see Exhibit 5).

Based on interviews with the principal and teachers during a visit to WLC, this profile details the following four strategies identified as being key to the school's success:

- Clear school mission of world class education and a culture of learning
- Strong internal and external school community
- High expectations for teachers, students, and parents
- Rigorous standards-based curriculum and common assessments

Exhibit 3. School and District Facts, 2007-08

	School	District
Location	Los Angeles, CA	
Grade span	K-5*	K-12
Number of schools	—	751
Enrollment	246	647,704

* In 2007-08, WLC offered grades K-5 but expanded to K-6 in 2008-09.

Source: California Basic Educational Data Systems (CBEDS), 2007-08

Why Watts Learning Center Was Selected

To identify high-performing schools across the state, we examined student and school performance data from 2004-05 through 2007-08. An overview of our methodology is posted on the SchoolsMovingUp website: http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/pdf/CA_CC_High_Perf_Schools_Criteria2009.pdf.

Additionally, we selected schools to highlight based on the following criteria:

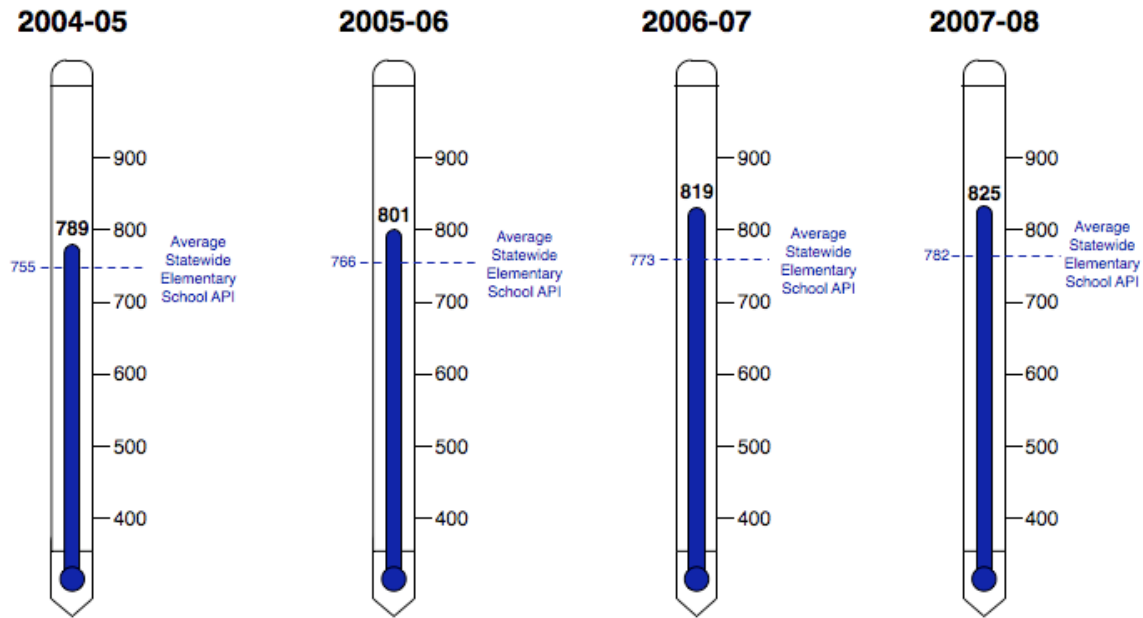
- **Substantially higher performance than predicted**
As indicated by a Similar Schools rank of 10 in 2007-08 (see Exhibit 1), WLC students are performing better than their peers in similar schools.
- **Meeting or exceeding subgroup performance standards**
WLC students in all numerically significant subgroups¹ are meeting or exceeding Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals in both English language arts and mathematics (see Exhibits 6 and 7).
- **Sustained performance over time**
WLC met all AYP requirements and was not identified for program improvement in 2004-05 through 2007-08. WLC also met all Academic Performance Index (API) targets in 2004-05 through 2007-08 (see Exhibit 4).
- **High-need student population**
The percentage of students at WLC eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (82 percent) is substantially higher than the state average for elementary schools (see Exhibit 2).
- **No selectivity in admissions**
WLC does not have any selection criteria. All students are welcome to apply. First priority is given to students with siblings currently attending the school, and the remaining students are selected by lottery.

Recent School Awards

- California Academic Achievement Award, 2007, 2008, and 2009
- California Distinguished School Award, 2004
- Hart Vision Award: Charter School of the Year, California Charter Schools Association, 2007

¹ A subgroup is defined as numerically significant for percent proficient if it has 100 or more students with valid scores or 50 or more students with valid scores who make up at least 15 percent of the total valid scores.

Exhibit 4. Schoolwide API Scores for Watts Learning Center Compared to the Average Statewide Elementary School API, 2004-05 Through 2007-08



Source: Academic Performance Index, 2005-06 through 2007-08

Factor 1: Clear School Mission of World Class Education and a Culture of Learning

World class education

The WLC’s mission is to provide children with a world class education. Many of the students have never left the Watts neighborhood and have had limited interaction with people of different ethnicities and cultures. Therefore, each teacher at WLC takes their class on multiple field trips throughout the year, from visiting the beach to exploring a museum, to expose students to new experiences and information. Also, students in the fourth or fifth grade are taken on an international field trip every other year to destinations such as Ghana, Senegal, South Africa, and Egypt. This “Passport to the World” trip enables students to interact with other students their age from around the world. Parents vote on the trip’s destination, meet regularly to fundraise for it, and accompany the students during the trip as chaperones. Fundraising events have included lemonade stands, barbecues, healthy snack sales, church gospel festivals, and a roller skating community party. The community also donates funds; for example, a local church started a collection for the school trip. The school subsidizes remaining costs from other donations. In addition, staff members at WLC share aspects of their own cultures and backgrounds with students. For example, on International Day, a South African teacher performed a South African dance, and a teacher born in Guyana to East Indian parents shared stories of her childhood and ancestry.

The school mission is to provide kids with a world class education. And we’ve proven it can be done. Even though [for some] this is a forgotten community, we are giving them the tools they need to succeed. They are the future leaders.

David Mabowe,
4th grade teacher

A culture of learning

The staff at WLC emphasize that the school's culture of learning begins by discussing college, careers, and life choices with their classes starting in kindergarten. Many teachers nurture friendly classroom rivalries based on the universities they attended, so that students begin to identify themselves with institutions of higher learning. For example, the classes taught by University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and University of Southern California (USC) alumni tend to compete against each other, and each class usually roots for its teacher's alma mater's sports teams. Staff members stress the importance of positive role models. For instance, students are empowered through frequent references to successful African Americans and Latinos. WLC's after-school enrichment program, offered by *STAR (Science, Theater, Art, Recreation) Education*² and taught by *STAR Education* instructors, strives to enhance this culture of learning by giving students the opportunity to receive additional tutoring and to study electives such as Mandarin, Spanish, art, music, dance, and chess.

Exhibit 5. Staff Characteristics, 2007-08

	School	Statewide Elementary School Average
Teacher Characteristics:		
Number of students per full time teacher	21 : 1	20 : 1
Average years in education	6 years	13 years
Percentage with greater than BA degree	92%	86%
Percentage with full credential	58%	97%
Full Time Staff per 250 Students:		
Administrators	2 : 250	1 : 250
Pupil services	0 : 250	0 : 250
Paraprofessionals	6 : 250	3 : 250
Clerical	2 : 250	1 : 250

Source: California Basic Educational Data Systems (CBEDS), 2007-08

Factor 2: Strong Internal and External School Community

The school as a part of the larger community

Incorporating families and the surrounding community into the school is an important aspect of WLC's mission. Sandra Fisher, one of the school's founders and a member of the school board, explained that parents expressed a need for a safe place for their children while they were at work. Thus, to provide needed services to the community as well as quality education for the children, the school stays open from 7 in the morning until 6 in the evening.

WLC also partners with several external entities to bolster the school's presence in the community. Principal Katherine Nelson and parent volunteers visit local Head Start programs to tell parents about opportunities available at the school once their child reaches school age. AmeriCorps³ has been working with the school since the first year it opened. SeniorCorps⁴ members also work in many

² *STAR Education* is a non-profit charitable education company that provides full-service extended education programs and that works with schools to enhance school curriculum. It is funded through a combination of earned income, grants, and individual donations.

³ AmeriCorps is a residential national service program that engages young adults ages 18 to 24 in full-time service for 10 months to one year in the United States. It is directly operated by the Corporation for National and Community Service, an independent federal agency.

⁴ SeniorCorps currently connects more than 500,000 Americans over the age of 55 to service opportunities with individuals, nonprofits, and other community organizations throughout the United States. It is operated by the Corporation for National and Community Service, an independent federal agency.

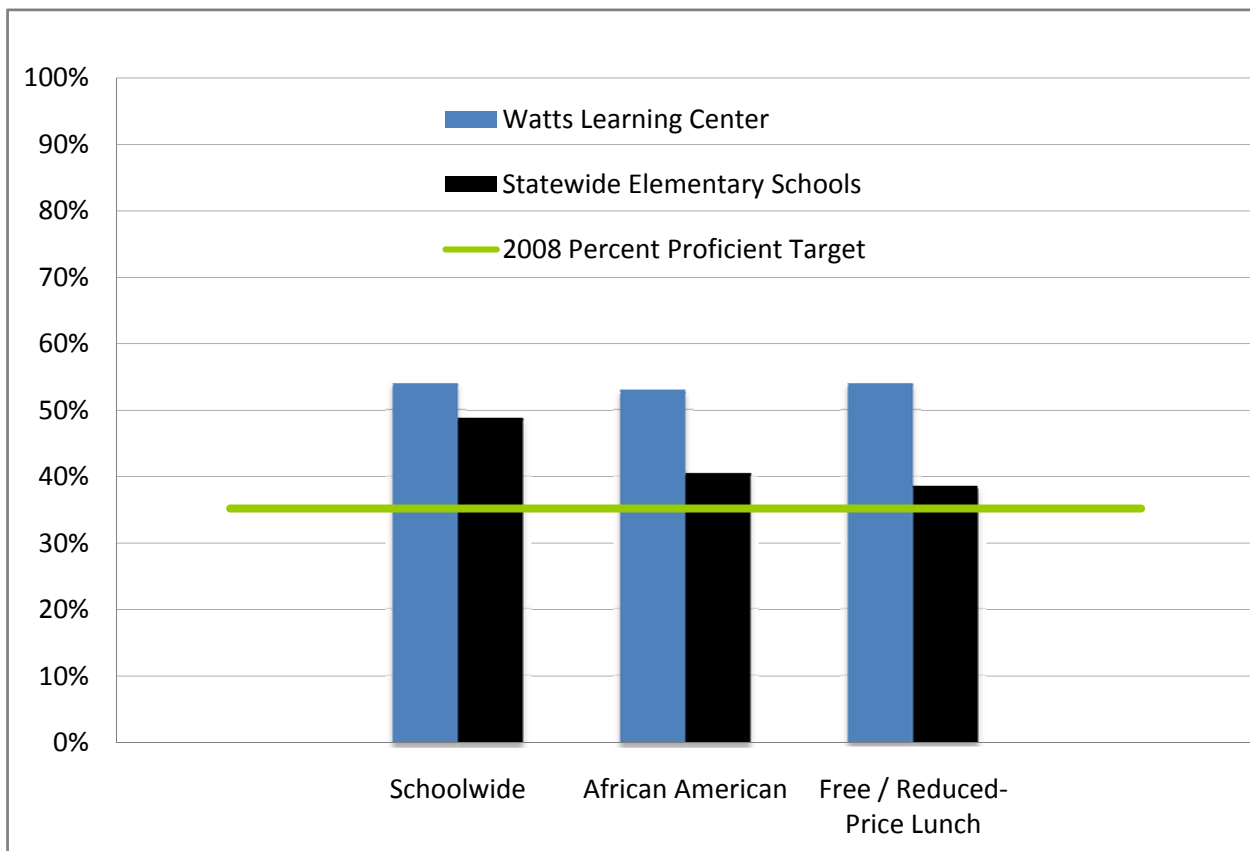
classrooms as “foster grandparent” classroom aides. Additionally, WLC also has a relationship with Kedren Community Health Center, which provides free counseling services for WLC students with severe emotional problems. The school has also fostered relationships with the Watts Labor Community Action Committee, the African American Alumni Association at UCLA, and local elected officials (e.g., councilmen, the local community redevelopment agency, state legislators). WLC garners support from establishments in the Watts community to donate resources and to organize fieldtrips such as outings to the local fire station, library, and police station. The school’s partnership with a local YMCA enables students to attend enrichment classes such as karate or swimming. Finally, a local golf course donates after-school golf instruction for interested students.

In short, by involving parents and local organizations, WLC has rallied the support of the surrounding community and allowed the school to provide quality education, extracurricular activities, and counseling services rooted in and strengthened by the local community.

We encourage parents to be here all day all the time. I feel it’s our responsibility to help parents develop a skill set to be able to help their child. We see this school as a resource for the community.

Katherine Nelson,
Principal

Exhibit 6. Schoolwide and Subgroup* English Language Arts AYP Proficiency Targets and Scores for Watts Learning Center Compared to Average Statewide Elementary School Scores, 2007-08

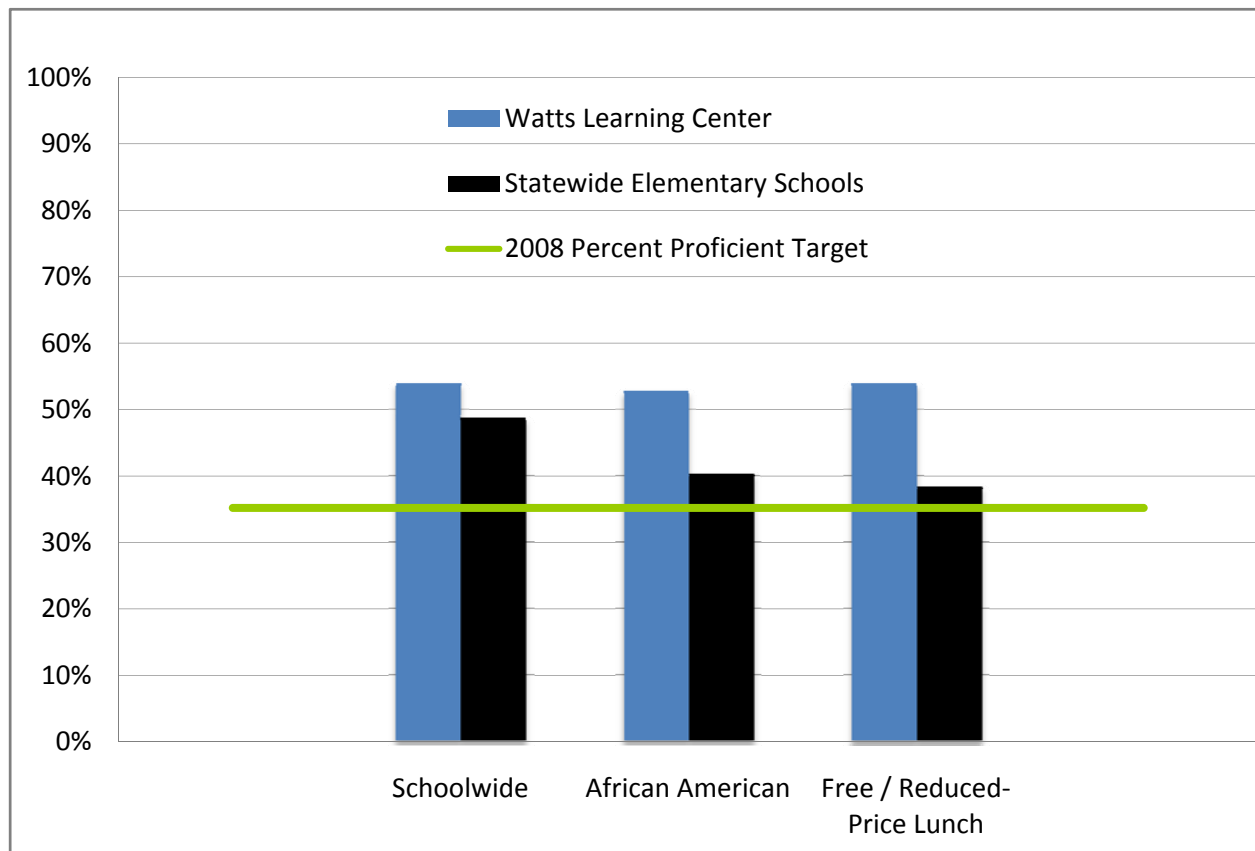


*Subgroups are ordered proportional to size.
Source: California Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), 2007-08

Staff participation and collaboration

Staff described WLC as a large family. The school's small size allows teachers to know most of the students, creating a close-knit community. Staff also described the school as democratic, with teachers encouraged to participate in decision making—especially in regard to topics that could affect instruction. The school board is involved in most decisions related to the school; however, several staff explained that the board strongly considers teacher and principal input in making decisions. The principal attends board meetings, as does a teacher representative who speaks on behalf of teachers and students. Staff meet regularly, and attend professional development sessions where they are strongly encouraged to collaborate, share, and learn from each other. The principal regularly meets with teachers by grade level and across grades. Once a week during their physical education free period, each grade level's instructional team convenes to collaborate on data and to design student interventions. For example, teachers mentioned having recognized a weakness in math in certain content areas and consequently inviting selected students to after-school math sessions.

Exhibit 7. Schoolwide and Subgroup* Mathematics AYP Proficiency Targets and Scores for Watts Learning Center Compared to Average Statewide Elementary School Scores, 2007-08



*Subgroups are ordered proportional to size.

Source: California Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), 2007-08

Factor 3: High Expectations for Teachers, Students, and Parents

High expectations for teachers

The high standards for teachers are made clear from the preliminary interviews conducted with all prospective teachers. This intensive process includes separate interviews with the principal and two board members as well as a classroom observation. Teachers are expected to create yearly pacing guides and turn in weekly lesson plans in alignment with California state standards. These weekly lesson plans are often tailored and supplemented by teachers to accommodate the pace at which their students learn and progress through the material. Teachers are also expected to keep their students' parents well informed of their child's progress and needs. Principal Katherine Nelson emphasizes that teachers "have to be willing to do whatever it takes at all costs."

High expectations for students

The staff at WLC has high expectations for students' behavior, effort, and attitude. Students are expected to resolve conflicts in a non-violent, respectful manner, and to talk to a teacher about the situation as necessary. Students are also expected to exert considerable effort and time on their schoolwork. For example, second grade students are given approximately an hour of homework every day and expected to complete all of their homework before class the following day. Furthermore, students are expected to participate in additional activities outside school to increase their chances of academic success. For instance, WLC holds Camp Learn for six weeks during the summer, a program for struggling students that has been expanded to include students entering kindergarten. Kindergarten students are expected to attend this camp to become acquainted with the WLC environment and to prepare for the culture of learning and high expectations at WLC so that they can focus on learning once school officially begins.

High expectations for parents

WLC also holds parents to a high standard because the school is built on the belief that the success and future of children requires a positive and involved partnership between the school and home. Every year, staff assemble parents of new students and explain the types of volunteer activities available at the school. Parents are expected to attend three workshops offered by the school and to volunteer for 30 hours at the school every year. The school also holds two to three parent workshops every month during the school year on such topics as financial literacy, literacy at home, and parent-child communication. Local organizations often provide support for the workshops, such as having the local library hold the workshop on literacy at home or having the local bank hold the workshop on financial literacy. Up to 30 parents attend any given workshop; some parents continue to attend workshops throughout the year even after they have fulfilled the requirement. Parents are encouraged to volunteer in whatever way they can, from helping in the front office for 30 minutes in the morning to chaperoning a field trip. Parents also meet once or twice a month to plan fundraisers for the school's biennial trip abroad.

I think the collaboration between the parents, students, and teachers is an important part of our success. You know all the parents; you have all their phone numbers ... Our parents are really involved and teachers can communicate with them. It is hard for students to fall through the cracks. It's kind of like a family.

Erin Niell,
6th Grade Teacher

Factor 4: Rigorous Standards-Based Curriculum and Common Assessments

Rigorous curriculum

WLC's rigorous curriculum is designed to foster critical thinking and prepare students to succeed in upper grades and higher education. Mathematics, science, and language arts coaches focus on supporting instruction that builds literacy across content areas. The school utilizes many Open Court resources for English Language Arts (ELA) and builds upon these tools with supplementary materials—such as thinking maps—introduced to teachers during professional development or discovered during research on best practices. The school also utilizes Fast ForWord reading intervention software products specifically for first grade students to strengthen brain processing and literacy skills through specially designed computer games. In the 2008-09 school year, WLC adopted Singapore Mathematics, a rigorous, pedagogical curriculum developed by the Singapore Ministry of Education, to help elementary school students solve difficult word problems by pictorially representing the problems and numbers. WLC also integrates algebraic concepts and symbols into all math courses because algebra is so crucial for success in later grades.

Ongoing use of assessments

Students are assessed weekly using teacher-created benchmark assessments. Fast ForWord computer-based assessments determine how well first grade students are developing their sequencing, memory, attention, and processing abilities. Certain Open Court assessments are utilized by WLC as well. Students are also assessed quarterly using the Northwest Evaluation Association's (NWEA) test. Teachers enter assessment information into the DataDirector computer program, which synthesizes and analyzes each student's test scores as well as student scores across each grade and across the school. Through regular assessments, teachers are able to identify students in need of additional assistance and provide them with opportunities to enhance their skills. In 2008-09, WLC began sharing each student's performance data with the students themselves to show them where they need to improve. Staff noted that they constantly look at student data and "focus on each student as an individual."

We have algebraic concepts all the way down to kindergarten. We know that for our population, Algebra is one of the gatekeepers to higher education. So, we want to start that very early so that they can begin to think in symbolic terms, not just the manipulation of symbols but to have a deeper understanding of mathematics.

Gene Fisher,
Co-founder

More Information:

- For more information about this school please go to the school's website: www.wattslearningcenter.org or contact Katherine Nelson, Principal, Watts Learning Center, Los Angeles, California: knelson@wattslearningcenter.org or (323)754-9900.
- For more information about other high-performing high-need schools, please see other school profiles on the SchoolsMovingUp website: <http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/print/htdocs/smu/ideas/schools.htm>.
- For more information about this study, please contact Mette Huberman, Senior Research Analyst, American Institutes for Research, Palo Alto, California: mhuberman@air.org or (650) 843-8174.