

**Academic and Social/Character
Achievement**

At the

River School

A Charter Middle School in Napa, California

Study conducted by

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Introduction

The River School, a charter middle school in Napa, California, provides an alternative to the larger schools in the district by offering academically high standards, an integrated curriculum, and a values-based learning environment emphasizing students' social and character development in concert with their intellectual proficiency.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that students at the River School thrive both academically and social/emotionally. Teachers and parents claim that students take responsibility for themselves and their education and are therefore more committed to their own success. River School students tend to score high on standardized tests and get above-average grades in high school.

In order to determine more precisely how these students compare to their non-River School peers and how these results hold up over time, the River School commissioned Sara Guciardo, an independent researcher, to conduct a study contrasting the 50 high school juniors who attended the River School to those that did not. These students completed the River School program in 2001, the first year in which it was possible to attend for all three of their middle school years. A control group of 50 Napa juniors who did not attend the River School but with similar academic, socio-economic, home language and ethnic backgrounds were isolated by NVUSD and matched to the River School 2001 graduating class.

Standardized test scores, grade point averages and a specifically designed self-assessment survey were used to gather information about students' academic progress as well as their social/character development. The following report shows the results of this study.

Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine the success of the River School's academic and social/character curriculums. In order to do this, River School students' academic and social/character development were compared to non-River School students from similar backgrounds in the following areas:

Academic

- Mathematics
- Language Arts, both reading and writing

Social /Character

The River School values students' character development as well as academic growth. Specifically, the program aims to teach the "Four Rs:" responsibility, respect, resourcefulness, and responsiveness. These characteristics are taught explicitly and embedded into the "implicit curriculum" of the school through listening groups, whole-school meetings, the discipline policy, and teacher-parent-student conferences.

These four Rs are defined as follows:

- Responsibility: Willingness to see oneself as cause in a matter.
- Respect: Honoring one's ability to make decisions.
- Resourcefulness: A state of being readily able to meet and handle a situation.
- Responsiveness: A sense of community, social interest, belonging and a concern for others

In addition, the study examined how students' sense of academic confidence compared between the two groups. This includes how well prepared they felt for high school, how much they enjoy learning, and how well they think they will do in their future upon completion of school.

Methodology

In order to achieve these objectives, it was important that the fifty River School students be compared to students within the Napa district that come from similar backgrounds. For this reason, a “control” group of fifty students was developed that matched the River School students. The following information was gathered from enrollment documents and used for comparison purposes:

	River School	Control
Home Language	92% English 8% Spanish	92% English 8% Spanish
Ethnicity	84% Caucasian 12% Hispanic 4% Native American	84% Caucasian 12% Hispanic 4% Native American
Special Ed Status	2% Receive Services	0% Receive Services
Gate Status	20% GATE	20% GATE
Parents Level of Education	2% Below High School 6% HS Graduate 28% Some College 26% College Graduate 32% Post-College	2% Below High School 6% HS Graduate 30% Some College 26% College Graduate 36% Post-College
Free & Reduced Lunch	12% Receive Services	12% Receive Services
Gender	64% Female 36% Male	67% Female 33% Male
English Language Learn.	2% ELL	2% ELL
98-99 SAT9 Reading NP	63.69%	69.89%
98-99 SAT9 Reading NCE	60.85%	63.32%
98-99 SAT9 Math NP	52.86%	60.06%
98-99 SAT9 Math NCE	52.05%	57.21%
98-99 SAT9 Language NP	67.63%	67.73%
98-99 SAT9 Language NCE	62.28%	62.3%

The control group was then compared to River School class along both the academic and social/character development lines.

Academic

The two groups of high school juniors were compared academically by reviewing their 2003-2004 math and language arts grade point averages (GPAs) as well as math and language arts test scores from 2002-2003 and 2003-2004, including:

- California Standards Test (CST),
- CAT6 / SAT9, and
- The District Writing Assessment (DWA).

The entire River School group and control group scores (100%) were used for this data.

Social/Character

In order to compare the character development of the two groups of students, a self-assessment questionnaire was created. The 40-question survey was sent home to all of the former River School students and the control group. The survey asked students to evaluate their social/character development relative to the Four Rs, (the principal qualities emphasized at the River School) plus academic confidence by scoring themselves on key indicators. (See Appendix A.)

Students were encouraged to complete the survey and return it in a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Of the 100 students surveyed, 60% (30 from each group) were returned and usable.

Findings

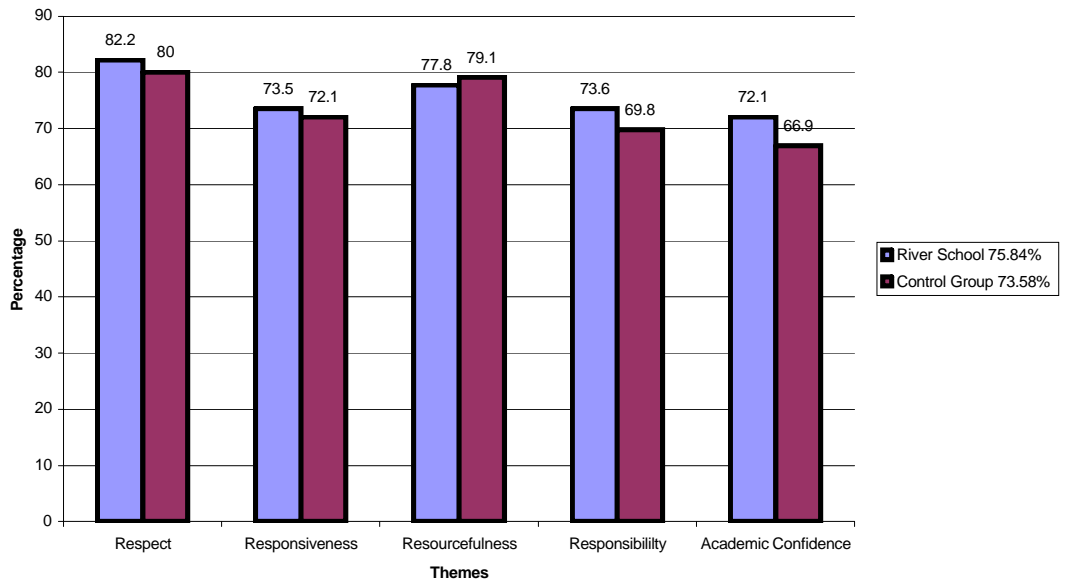
River School students scored higher overall than their non-River School counterparts in both the academic realm and the character self-assessment survey. The difference was particularly sizeable in their language arts test scores and GPAs. On the social/character survey, the greatest difference was seen in the areas of academic confidence and sense of responsibility.

Social/Character Qualities

River School students combined score was 2.26% higher than the control group overall, across all five themes.

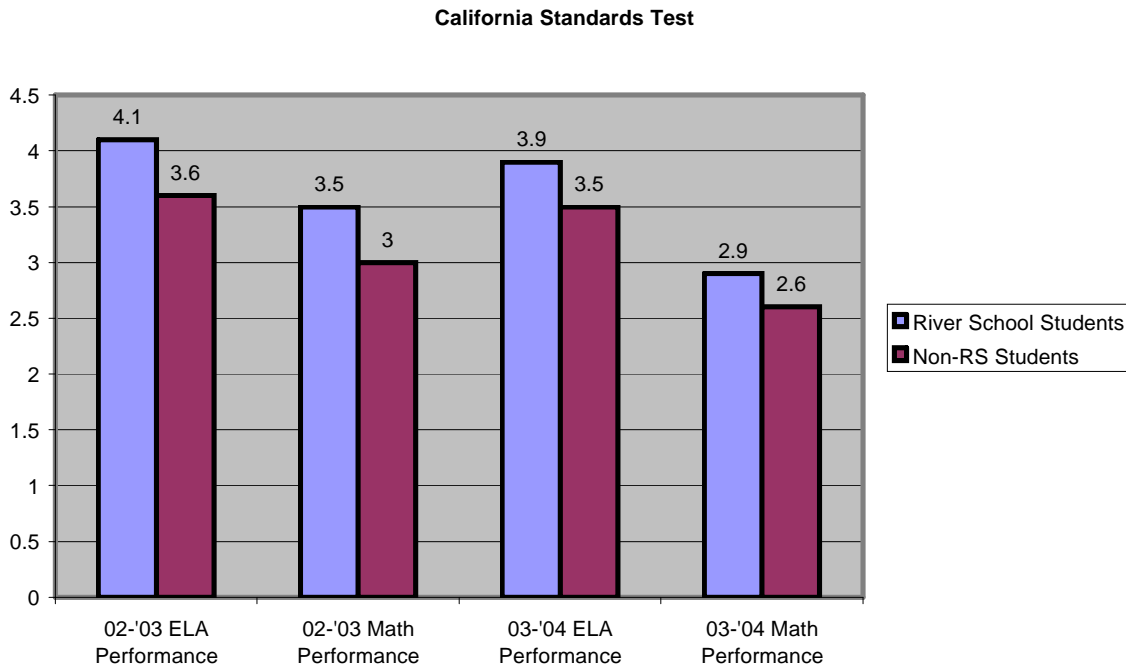
- In three of the Four Rs (core character qualities), River School students self-assessed at higher levels than the control group: Respect (2.2%), Responsiveness (1.4%), and Responsibility (3.8%).
- Their scores in Resourcefulness were 1.3% lower than the control group.
- They scored 5.2% higher in Academic Confidence, which measures their self-confidence in school, their future and academic pursuits.

Summary



Academic Performance

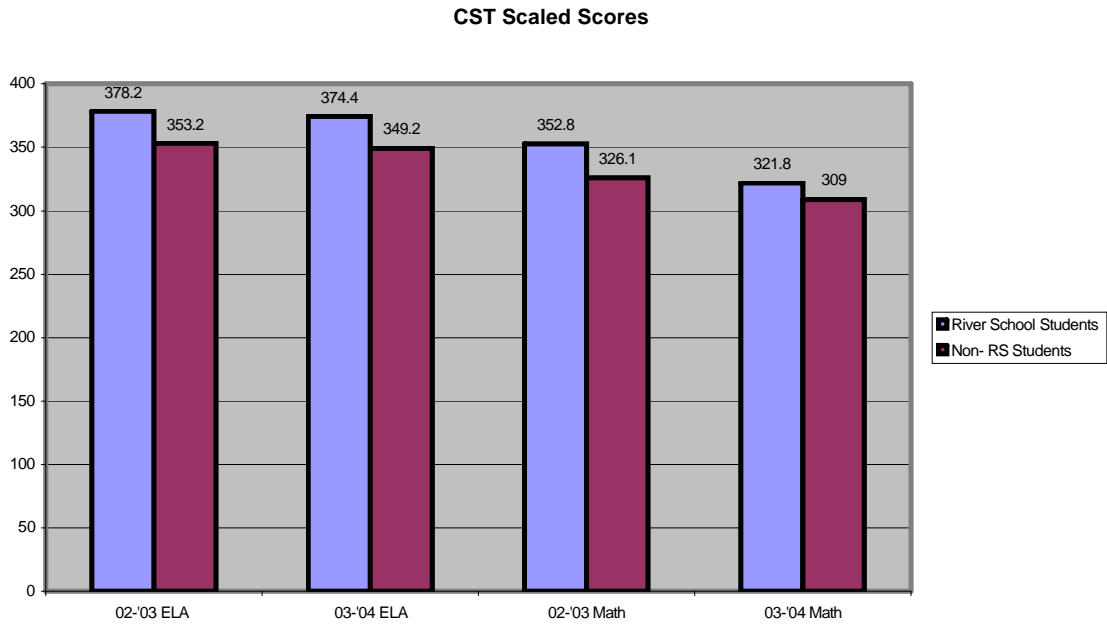
River School students achieved consistently higher in language arts, both writing and reading on all tests and GPAs. In math, River School students scored higher than the control group on the CST, but lower than their counterparts on the CAT6/SAT9. They also received lower GPAs in math.



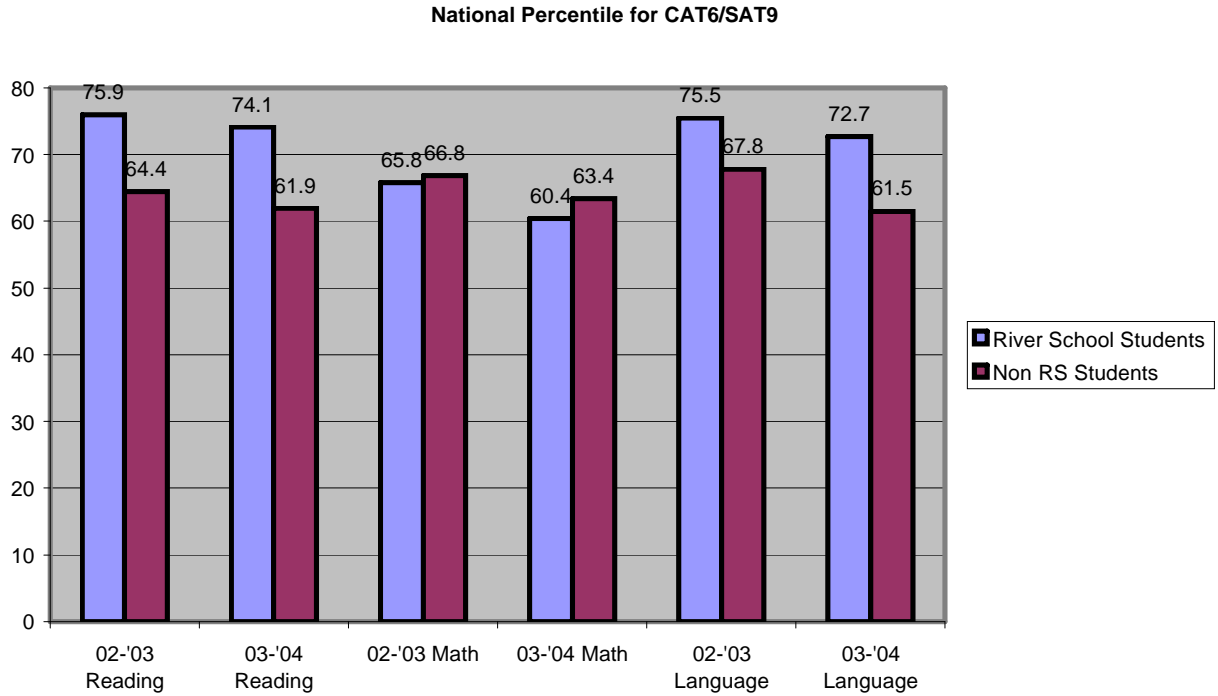
The California Standards Test is a standardized test administered annually in all public schools in California. A score of 4 indicates proficiency and a score of 5 is advanced.

- River School students scored higher in both mathematics and language arts, 8.5% higher across the board combining the '02-'03 scores and '03-'04 scores.

The following chart shows the CST scaled score, in which 350 is proficient.



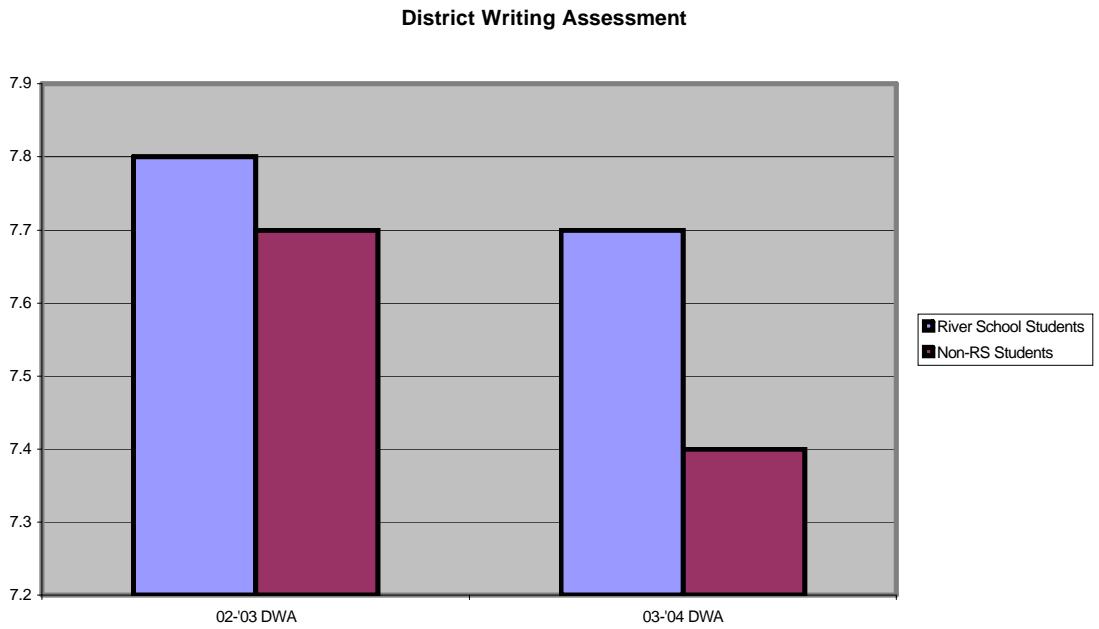
The CAT6 / SAT9 is a norm-referenced standardized tests based on national, rather than state standards. Scores indicate students' placement on a national percentile rank instead of a performance level like the CSTs.



- River School students scored higher than the control group in reading (11.85%) and language arts (9.45%) both years¹.
- They scored slightly lower (2%) than the control group in math both years.

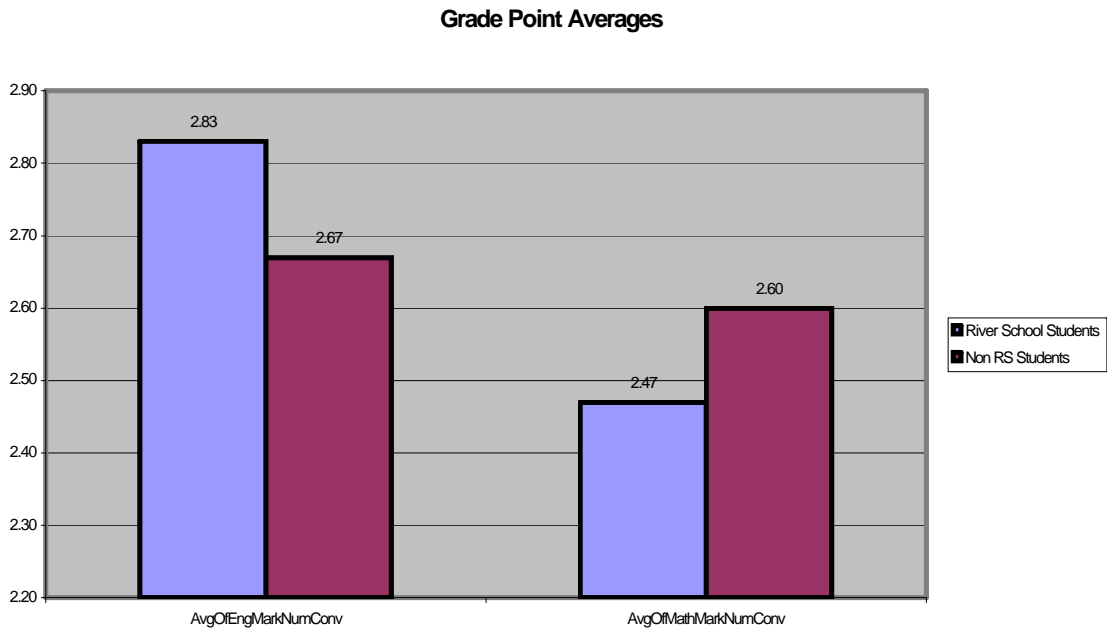
¹ Percentages based on averages of 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 scores.

The District Writing Assessment is given to all middle school students in the Napa Unified School District. Out of 12 possible points, a score of 7 is considered a passing grade.



- River School students scored higher than the control group in both 2002-03 and 2003-04.

In their junior year, River School students' average GPA was higher in English than the control groups' average, but lower in mathematics.



Summary

High school juniors who previously attended the River School were compared to a control group of students that match their collective profile along the following criteria:

- Socio-economic background,
- ethnic and language background,
- gender,
- parents' education level,
- RSP & GATE services,
- and elementary school educational performance.

Students' performance was compared both academically, using standardized test scores and GPAs from their junior year in high school, and social/character developmentally, using a self-assessment questionnaire.

- The former River School students achieved at higher levels academically in language arts. For example their '03-'04 CST scores were 8% higher in language arts and their junior year GPAs were 3.2% higher in that subject.
- Their math scores were less conclusive. They scored 6% higher on their '03-'04 CST, but 2.6% lower on their junior year GPAs in math and 3% lower on their CAT6/SAT9 math scores.

On the social/character survey, former River School students self-assessed at higher levels than their non-River School peers in four of the five qualities tested: respect, responsibility, responsiveness, and academic confidence. They scored slightly lower in the area of resourcefulness.

While the average difference in their level of social/character development was relatively small (2.26%), it demonstrates that the character education at the school has ongoing and lasting impact for students. The superior academic scores further validate the affect of students' increased sense of responsibility and academic confidence.