

## Comparison of the Common Factors of the Top Academic Elementary Schools to the Average Elementary Schools in California: Looking beyond School Leadership

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**Abstract :** Introduction: There has been much research on academic achievement in elementary schools. Most of the research has been on school leadership. While research has focused on the role of leadership on school improvement, little research has examined what variables the top elementary schools have in common. To undertake school improvement, it is important to understand what factors the best schools share. The purpose of this study was to examine data of the “Best Elementary Schools in California,” based on academic achievement as rated by three prominent websites and determine if these schools had any common factors which were different than the statewide averages. The variables examined included access to subject matter specialists (physical education, art, and music), librarians, after school programs, class size, socioeconomic status, and diversity. The participants consisted of the top public elementary schools in California based on the websites i) <https://www.niche.com/k12/search/best-schools/>, ii) <https://www.finder.com/best-schools-california>, and iii) <https://www.schooldigger.com/go/CA/schoolrank.aspx>. The data for subject matter specialists (physical education, art, and music), librarians, after school programs, class size, socioeconomic status, and diversity were collected from these top schools and compared to California statewide averages. Results indicate that top public elementary schools in California have a high number of subject matter specialists that teach physical education, art, and music. These positions are on the decline in the average public elementary school in California, but the top schools have abundant access to these specialists. The physical education specialist has the highest statistically significant difference between the nationwide average and the top schools—librarians, and after school programs are also most commonly high in top public elementary schools in California. The high presence of these programs may be aiding academic achievement in less visible ways. Class size is small, socio-economic status is high, and diversity is low among top public elementary schools in California when compared to the statewide average public elementary schools in California. The single largest area of discrepancy was between physical education specialists in a top school and their state and nationwide averages. The socioeconomic status of schools and parents may be an underlining factor affecting several other variables. This affluence could explain how these schools were able to have access to subject matter specialists, after-school activities, and, therefore, more opportunities for physical activity and greater learning opportunities affecting academic achievement.

**Keywords :** academic achievement, elementary education, factors, schools

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