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ABSTRACT

School boards associations in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas commissioned this report about K-12 education along La Frontera, the United States/Mexico border, to identify common issues and target policymaking and assistance efforts. Data were obtained from a research review and interviews and surveys of superintendents and school board presidents from 206 school districts within 100 miles of the border. Findings indicate that La Frontera is a historically impoverished region with a high population growth rate that outpaces infrastructure development. The region is primarily bicultural and bilingual, consisting largely of Latinos and Whites, with many limited-English speakers. Many districts struggle to recruit and retain qualified teachers, especially near the border. Most districts experience significant fluctuations in student enrollment and attendance that make it difficult to predict revenue streams and plan budgets, predict staffing needs, and maintain continuity in instruction. Mexican students who cross the border daily to attend school force district leaders to choose between enforcing residency rules or educating all children who show up. La Frontera districts typically deliver services such as health and dental care, life and study skills classes, English classes, and classes for parents on the American educational system. Implications for policy and future research are discussed. An appendix presents maps of district-level student achievement data for each of the four states. (Contains 48 references) (TD)

La Frontera: Study of School Districts Along the United States/Mexico Border

Tenley S. Harrison, June Lee-Bayha, and Ed Sloat

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ABSTRACT

The intent of this study was to identify current key issues facing the school districts on the United States/Mexico border (a region known as *La Frontera*) and to provide a research basis for action items. Funded by the School Boards Associations of Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas, WestEd reviewed research, interviewed superintendents, and surveyed school board presidents and superintendents from the 283 districts located within 100 miles of the U.S./Mexico border. Looking at the qualitative data, major concerns among La Frontera school districts include inadequate funding, teacher recruitment and retention, and the provision of social services to students and their families. The authors also began to gather quantitative data regarding student achievement.

INTRODUCTION

This study was designed to look at all U.S. districts located within 100 miles of the U.S./Mexico border, which stretches 1,951 miles across Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, and to provide a research base for further study and focused action.

While this report does not claim to paint a complete and detailed picture of life in La Frontera, it does present some basic contextual information to inform understanding of the key issues faced by school districts in this region. In this paper, we weave the traditional literature review in with our findings.[1] Our findings are divided into five sections: community and district characteristics, funding concerns, teacher recruitment and retention, student enrollment and attendance, and family and student needs.

As a group, La Frontera districts face the same challenges now confronting so many districts across the nation: tightening budgets, difficulty recruiting fully qualified teachers and those with certain credentials, and the demands of high-stakes accountability, which have been intensified by the recently reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (*No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*). While there is obviously great variety amongst the 283 districts included in this study, many districts in La Frontera share characteristics, which present additional challenges to schools trying to raise academic achievement. Virtually all identify insufficient funding as a major issue. Most serve relatively large numbers of students whose home language is Spanish

and who are English language learners. Many are struggling to attract and retain well-qualified teachers. A majority of districts are dealing with significant fluctuations in student attendance and enrollment. In addition, a majority identify themselves as rural. And many have felt it necessary to guarantee some type of social service support for students and their families.

METHODOLOGY

Initial Parameters of the Study: By design, the scope of the study was exploratory, with the intent to provide data in order to identify issues facing school districts in this targeted location. One phase of the study focuses on collecting quantitative data, while the other focuses on obtaining qualitative feedback from district superintendents and local governing board presidents. The districts included in the study as well as the populations to be surveyed were determined by our clients, the School Boards Associations in Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas.

Multi-phase Design: The study began with a review of the literature addressing issues facing districts located along the U.S./Mexico border. While information was available on a variety of language, cultural, and income-related issues facing school districts in general, little published information targeted school districts along the border in particular. Because of this, development of domain categories for use in a survey instrument was difficult to articulate. Before a survey instrument could be developed, a more in-depth investigation of the pertinent issues was necessary. Therefore, an interview process was adopted to help identify and clarify the core content areas. From this process, a more directed instrument was developed.

> **Phase I:** In Phase I, a stratified random sample of districts from La Frontera was selected for phone interviews based on three criteria: (1) size of district based on enrollment, (2) type of community – urban versus rural, and (3) proximity to the border – close (within 10 miles of the border) or farther away (beyond 10 miles). The district enrollment data and locale code (i.e., rural, urban) were taken from the Common Core of Data (CCD) for the 1999-2000 school year. For each interview, uniform open-ended questions were asked of district representatives. In each case, efforts were made to interview the district

superintendent. No interviews were conducted with local school board members. The interview questions asked of each participant were as follows:

1. *In your judgment, what are the three most pressing issues facing your district today?*
2. *In what ways are these issues unique to schools located along the U.S./Mexico border?*
3. *For each area that you identified, what do you feel are the best solutions?*

Phase II: The information gathered from the Phase I interviews, together with information obtained from literature reviews, served as the basis for defining the main constructs of the final survey instrument. Six primary investigative areas were defined:

1. District & Community Characteristics (8 items)
    - The intent of this section was to collect a variety of demographic information from which to explore and evaluate more deeply the responses in other sections of the survey. In addition, this section sought to provide an understanding of the community in which the district is operating. The classification categories included proximity to the international border, language/cultural characteristics of the local community, employment base, and trends in population and immigration.

2. Attendance and Enrollment (6 items)
    - This section focused on changes in student populations (enrollment and attendance) and the impact such changes may have on the district's ability to provide services.

3. Teacher Recruitment and Retention (13 items)
    - This section focused on teacher recruitment and retention strategies as well as preferred attributes when hiring new teachers. These questions were placed in the context of whether or not there is a shortage of qualified teachers.

4. Social Services (7 items)
    - This section emphasized the provision of social services to students and their families, investigating whether services are rendered from the district, local community-based agencies, or are not locally available.

5. State and Federal Regulations (3 items)

    - This section asked for feedback on the role that state and federal regulations have on the district's ability to provide quality education services. The context of the questions included regulatory impact on English Language Learners (ELL) and the educational service effects of external assessment and accountability systems.

6. Benefits (1 item)
    - A final open-ended question asked about the benefits of being a La Frontera district.

This initial version of the survey was then sent via fax to district representatives who had agreed during the Phase I interviews to provide additional feedback and assistance. From the comments, suggestions, and critique received after this review, a final form of the instrument was constructed.

Phase III:

In order to build a profile of student achievement in La Frontera, statewide student assessment data had to be collected and analyzed for each of the four border states. However, the student testing programs differed across each state, making cross-state comparisons inappropriate.

California administers the STAR (State Testing and Reporting) assessment, composed of items from the Stanford Achievement Test Version 9 and the California Standards Test. California data are reported in terms of a composite Academic Performance Index (API) for spring 2002. The API ranges from a low of 200 to a high of 1000. Arizona administers the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS), a standards-based criterion referenced assessment. This study reports the spring 2002 AIMS data in terms of the average district scale scores. Arizona AIMS scale scores range from 300 to 700. Texas administers the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). The data are reported as the percent of students who "passed" the assessment based on established state-determined criteria in 2001. New Mexico administers the TerraNova norm-referenced test and this study reports the data for spring 2002. District performance for these assessments are reported in terms of percentiles for 2002.

Maps of district-level student achievement data for each of the four states are presented in the Appendix. In order to create the maps, school district boundary files for each state were obtained from the U.S. Bureau of the Census. These files contained identifying reference codes assigned by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The boundary files were uploaded into MapInfo, a geographic information system (GIS) software program, which allows for extensive analysis of statistical and spatially-referenced data. The test

score data files were constructed from information reported by each state department of education. NCES identifying district codes were appended to the testing information and then merged with the GIS boundary file. This allowed the generation of a pictorial representation of student assessment data by district in each state's La Frontera region.

These maps represent only a first step in a planned in-depth quantitative study examining districts in La Frontera for possible relationships between academic and demographic data, and also to supplement the findings of Phase I and II of this study, particularly in regards to the differences discovered between those districts within 20 miles of the border and those further away. A more in-depth look at each state's overall data in comparison to its La Frontera region is also planned. As Phase III is dependent on further funding, the following findings summarize Phase I and II.

La Frontera Population

Each of the four state School Board Associations provided WestEd with a list of districts to be included in the La Frontera population. For the project, this included all public school districts within a 100-mile range of the international border. The tables below (School Facilities & Enrollment) report selected descriptive information regarding the La Frontera district population. All of the data were compiled from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) for the school year 1999-2000.

School Facilities

State	Total Number of Districts	Total Number of Schools	Average Number of Schools	Largest Number of Schools within a District	Minimum Number of Schools within a District
Arizona	84	572	7	170	1
California	58	672	12	178	1
New Mexico	16	119	7	33	1
Texas	125	968	8	87	1
Total	283	2,331	34		

Enrollment

State	Total Enrollment	Percent Enrollment	Average Enrollment	Largest Enrollment	Smallest Enrollment
Arizona	219,992	16.0	2,683	65,139	5
California	520,011	37.9	8,966	143,969	36
New Mexico	61,961	4.5	3,873	22,020	235
Texas	570,789	41.6	4,566	63,500	17
Total	1,372,753	100.0	5,022		

As shown, the region of La Frontera as defined by this study contains 283 school districts containing 2,167 schools and 1,372,753 students. Texas records the largest number of districts (125) located within the border region, followed by Arizona (84), California (58), and New Mexico (16).

Texas reports the largest proportion of La Frontera students (41.6 percent) in relation to the total student population followed by California (37.9 percent). La Frontera enrollment in Arizona and New Mexico represents 16.0 and 4.5 percent, respectively.

Survey Response Rates

The table below reports the number and percent of surveys returned for the La Frontera population by state. In addition, return rates are broken down by administrator and governing board categories. The term "administrator" is used to represent surveys originally sent to the district superintendent with the recognition that some may have been completed and returned by senior district staff. Similarly, the term "governing board" refers to the board representative returning the survey.

State	Total Districts	Undupl'd Returns	Undupl'd District Rate (%)	Admin. Returns	Admin. Rate (%)	Gov. Board Returns	Gov. Board Rate (%)
Arizona	83	64	77.1	62	74.7	7	8.4
California	58	39	67.2	36	62.1	9	15.5
New Mexico	16	13	81.3	13	81.3	5	31.3
Texas	125	90	72.0	85	68.0	6	4.8
(Unknown)	1			1			
Total	**283**	**206**	**72.7**	**197**	**69.6**	**27**	**9.5**

Table Note: (Undupl'd) Unduplicated; (Admin.) Administrator; (Gov. Board) Governing Board

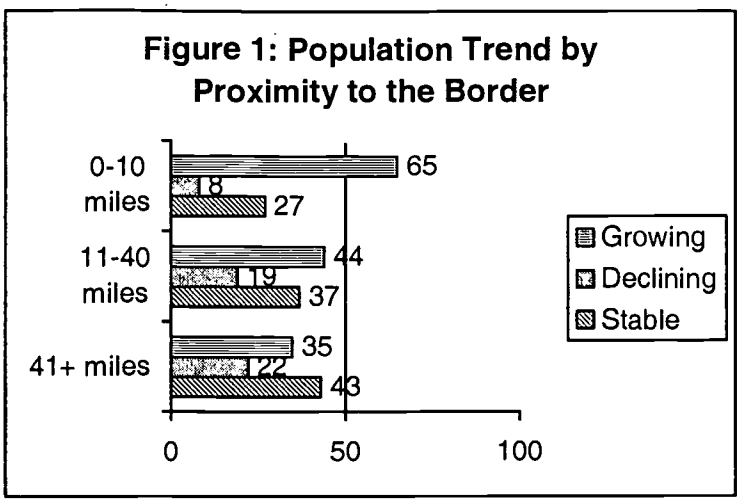
The table indicates that a total of 224 surveys were returned (197 from district administrators and 27 from governing board members). However, since surveys were sent to both superintendents and governing board presidents at each district, duplication of district representation is present in the counts. To understand the returns in terms of district coverage, the table reports an unduplicated count of returns. As shown, information was received on 206 or the 282 districts in the La Frontera region, for an overall coverage rate of just under 73 percent. By state, New Mexico reported the highest unduplicated return rate of 81 percent, followed by Arizona (77 percent), Texas (72 percent), and California (67 percent). Overall, administrators comprised the vast majority of the returns, posting a rate of just under 70 percent. The return rate for governing board members was just under 10 percent. One administrator survey was returned without a state identifier.

FINDINGS FROM PHASES I AND II

I. COMMUNITY AND DISTRICT CHARACTERISTICS

A growing population.

During the 1990s, the population nationwide increased by 10 percent.[2] Yet during that same period, the population in the 24 border counties of Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas — which account for a significant portion of La Frontera — grew by 22 percent.[3] This growth was driven primarily by high birth rates among the Latino[4] population and by continued immigration.[5] Both research and survey data show that the population growth on the border continues.[6] Of districts close to the border (0-10 miles), 65 percent report a growing population in their communities while only eight percent report a declining population. In contrast, of those districts located more than 40 miles from the border, just 35 percent report a growing community population and 22 percent say their population is declining.



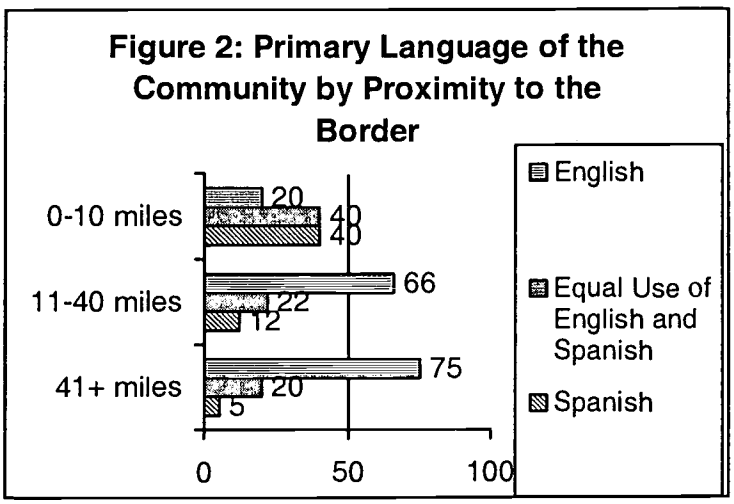
In many parts of La Frontera, infrastructure development has not kept pace with population. One extreme example is a housing shortage in some areas, which has contributed to the persistence of *colonias*. Most prevalent in rural Texas but also found in the other three border states, these improvised housing developments are home to hundreds of thousands of residents who struggle daily with substandard living conditions, including ramshackle dwellings, open sewers, and lack of sanitary water, all leading to a higher incidence of disease.[7]

A bicultural community.

Given the influx of immigrants from south of the border, it is perhaps not surprising that La Frontera is primarily bicultural and bilingual, its population largely Latino or white. For example, in Texas border counties, 77 percent of the students are Latino and 19 percent are white, compared to 23 percent and 60 percent, respectively, in the rest of the state.[8] In each of the four border states, Latinos account for at least 32 percent of the population.[9] That said, a great deal of variability exists within any population categorized as Latino.[10] This variability notwithstanding, the demographics of immigrant Latino youth as a whole are sobering: they are seven times more likely to drop out than their native-born peers.[11] Furthermore, 39 percent of Latino youth live in poverty, more than twice the rate of white children, and many Latino parents have limited educational backgrounds.[12]

Across La Frontera communities there appears to be an even split between English and Spanish as the primary language, but a closer look reveals significant differences between communities

closest to the border and those further away. Of those districts located more than 40 miles from the border, 75 percent report English as the primary language in their communities, with only five percent identifying Spanish as the primary language. In comparison, only 20 percent of districts located within 10 miles of the border report English as the primary language; these communities are either predominantly Spanish-speaking (40%) or equally Spanish- and English-speaking (40%).



The degree to which English is or is not spoken within a community has implications for English language learners (ELLs), as suggested in the comment of one California superintendent: "English is not needed to function in [our] community; there are few English models." As detailed later in this report, lack of English skills within the community also affects parental involvement in their children's education, as well as families' access to social services. When asked about their district's three most pressing issues, 20 percent of superintendents expressed concern for their ELL students; among other issues specific to this population, superintendents worry about the efficacy of language programs, standardized testing requirements, and the shortage of qualified English-as-a-Second-Language and bilingual teachers.

An economically disadvantaged area.

Forty-six percent of responding districts (from all four states with varying proximities to the border) report agriculture as the primary economic base of their community. An agricultural economy suggests rural communities with seasonal or temporary employment for migrant workers and corresponding complications for school districts. Among these complications are

fluctuating school enrollment and issues related to poverty, which will be detailed later in this report. Other types of employment reported in La Frontera are retail (14%), industry (13%), public sector (e.g., military, border patrol, schools) (10%), tourism (8%), oil and gas (4%), and other (7%).

Historically, the border region has been economically disadvantaged. La Frontera is home to pockets of notable wealth, such as certain areas of San Diego, California, but taken as a whole, its unemployment rates still hover in the teens, and per capita income is among the lowest in the nation.[13] According to a study by the U.S./Mexico Border Counties Coalition, the 24 counties directly adjacent to the border, taken as a group, rank among the poorest 10 percent of U.S. counties in per capita income (under $14,000).[14] Residents of La Frontera tend to be young, immigrant, and poorly educated.[15] The only available data for the border region specifically are from Texas, which accounts for about 56 percent of the border. There, 32 percent of La Frontera adults have less than a 9th grade education, and only 13 percent have completed college.[16] Almost half of the children live below the poverty level.[17] One superintendent says that 75 percent of the students in his district are economically disadvantaged, and 27 superintendents identify poverty-related conditions as a major issue.

II. PERVASIVE FUNDING CONCERNS

The most common concern among La Frontera districts is insufficient funding. The survey included no questions or prompts about financial issues, yet asked to identify their district's three most pressing issues, 61 percent of the respondents cited funding. The frustration many district leaders feel about this matter is exemplified in one superintendent's lament about "mandates from the state that need to be met regardless of a district's financial status" and in another's comment that "there are excessive demands with no funding for programs and services." The recent economic downturn and state budget cuts throughout these four states provide reason enough for districts to worry about funding. But in some districts concern is heightened by a state accountability system that ties funding to improved student performance. One superintendent expresses apprehension about the connection between funding and performance because, he says, "we have improved the last two years but have reached a ceiling."[18] Depending

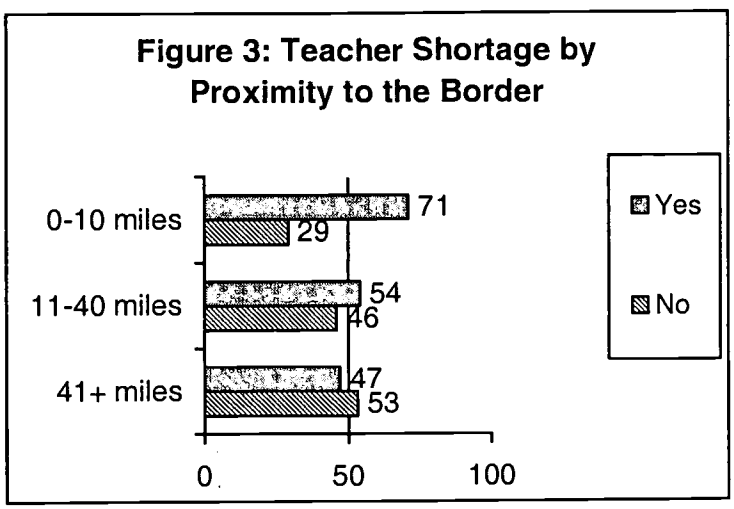
on the structure of a state's education accountability system, the situation can be further complicated for districts with large numbers of ELLs.

One California superintendent explained that in his district, there were so many ELLs who received waivers to skip the state assessment that only two schools ended up with enough test-takers to even be eligible for the state's rewards system.

The relative adequacy of a district's funding influences its capacity in all areas of operation: from ability to offer attractive teacher salaries and high quality professional development to implementation of smaller class sizes and provision of supplemental programming, such as after-school activities. In fact, facilities are identified as one of the most pressing issues after funding, with districts lacking adequate financial resources either to upgrade existing facilities or to build new ones to keep up with population growth (26%). Funding also affects a district's ability to provide social services to students and families, a function that increasing numbers of districts are taking on in order to help ensure students' readiness to learn.

III. TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

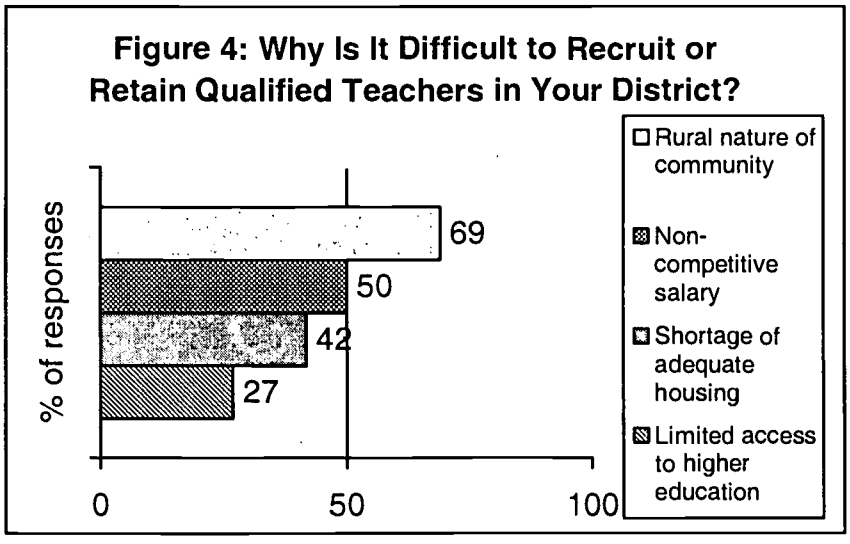
Reflecting a national trend, many La Frontera districts (56%) find it difficult to recruit and retain enough qualified teachers. The shortage is most acute near the border: 71 percent of the districts within 10 miles of Mexico report teacher shortages compared to 47 percent of those located more than 40 miles from the border.



According to respondents, La Frontera districts feel these shortages most strongly in the same academic or skill areas that districts across the country find hard to fill: special education (76%), math (72%), science (57%), and bilingual (43%) or English as a Second Language (ESL) (36%). Their difficulty in attracting and keeping the teachers they need seems primarily related to quality-of-life and salary issues.

District leaders most often identify "rural nature of the community" (69%) as a challenge in recruiting quality teachers. Quality-of-life issues are by no means unique to rural communities by the border; most rural areas across the nation lack easy access to the entertainment and cultural opportunities found in more urban areas. For teachers with working spouses, rural communities are also likely to offer a narrower mix of job opportunities than is available in cities. Indeed, while high-poverty urban schools with large minority populations gain attention for their chronically underqualified teaching forces, data from the federal Schools and Staffing Survey show similarly bleak numbers for rural schools in terms of percent of secondary students taught by teachers lacking certification, a major in the subject taught, or both.[19]

On the other hand, rural areas can hold a different kind of appeal. Common perceptions about country or small town living is that it offers a lower cost of living, a close-knit and supportive community, lower crime rates, and a more leisurely pace of life. Fifty-two percent of La Frontera districts report capitalizing on such characteristics — "selling quality of life" — in their recruitment efforts. La Frontera districts also see noncompetitive salaries (50%) and housing shortages (42%) as influencing teacher decisions about joining or staying in their district.



One superintendent notes that "to help recruit and

retain the best teachers, we need rewards for teachers and incentive pay for those who teach in high-poverty areas." Despite the fact that nation-wide, high-poverty, high-minority schools have higher percentages of under-qualified teachers,[20] and despite the looming NCLB deadline of the 2005-2006 school year for ensuring "high-quality" teachers in all core content classrooms, "of the 25 state-enacted or –regulated programs with pre-service and mentoring components..., only those in Massachusetts, Missouri, and Texas target potential teachers willing to work in high-poverty, high-minority, or low-achieving schools."[21] Specifically, Texas gives $5,000 bonuses to reading and math "mentor teachers" who agree to teach in target schools. For its part, California offers grants to needy districts and has created six regional recruiting centers to connect low-performing and low-income districts with certified teachers.[22] Arizona and New Mexico do not, leaving districts to fend for themselves.[23]

Despite funding shortfalls and varied support from the state, some districts across the states manage to offer signing bonuses, enhanced benefits, reimbursable moving expenses, or even subsidized housing. One California district offers a $7,500 stipend to anyone willing to earn a math credential and commit to teaching in the district for three years. One Texas district provides $2,500 stipends for teachers in the high-need areas of math, science, special education, and bilingual education. Another La Frontera district, in New Mexico, provides tuition loans. Additional recruiting methods used by La Frontera districts include exploring alternative certification (54%),[24] giving priority to hiring local applicants (41%), and offering incentives for students to return to the district as teachers, i.e., "grow-your-own" (18%). Examples provided by districts in open-ended questions and interviews of elements in a "grow-your-own" program include providing instructional aides with tuition and books, giving aides pay increases for advanced study, and, in one Texas district, encouraging high school students to return to the district by offering a starting salary equivalent to a third-year teacher once they are credentialed. Respondents were also asked what changes to teacher credentialing and licensing requirements would address the teacher shortage in their districts. Most recommend easing the reciprocity of teaching licensing across states (61%), followed by easing the requirements from other professions (52%) and from other countries (19%).

IV. FLUCTUATIONS IN STUDENT ENROLLMENT AND ATTENDANCE

A majority of La Frontera districts (56%) must deal with significant ebbs and flows in student enrollment and attendance, both within the same school year and from year to year. Nearly 70 percent of these districts note that, as a result, it is difficult to predict revenue stream and plan school budgets, as well as to predict staff positions. Fifty-nine percent say that having large numbers of students come and go disrupts the educational process, making it more difficult for teachers to maintain continuity in curriculum and instruction.

The survey included an open-ended question asking what successful strategies districts have used to stabilize enrollment and attendance. Twenty percent of the 107 districts responding say they have instituted rewards and incentives programs for increased or perfect attendance. Another 18 percent have opted, instead, to work closely with courts, police, and/or truant and attendance officers. Some combine the two approaches. Approximately a third of the districts (32%) are attempting to keep students in school by engaging them more successfully. These districts report trying to improve or enrich their curriculum with the addition of such high-interest or supportive activities as science programs, language development support, after-school programming, and technology offerings. (It is also worth noting that 80 percent of all La Frontera districts offer study skills classes, and 74 percent offer life skills classes.) Other strategies for dealing with this difficult issue include participating in federally-funded migrant programs[25] and working closely with local housing developers and city planning managers in an attempt to better predict student population and enrollment.

Lack of steady employment keeps families on the move.

A clear majority (78%) of those districts experiencing significant enrollment and attendance fluctuations identify employment factors as the reason. More specifically, half of responding districts identify migrant and seasonal employment as a cause. In addition to other challenges they face, children in migrant families[26] are often called upon to work to help support their family or to care for younger siblings while their parents work. Schools' attempts to provide students with remedial or make-up classes during the summer are destined to be of limited success for the same economic reasons. One California superintendent notes that "students have to work in the fields early in life, and school is not a priority. That happens a lot. There comes a

time when we need students in summer to complete work they missed during the year and parents will say the students have to work." In pre-survey interviews, a number of superintendents indicated their belief that some parents in their districts seem to think school attendance is voluntary rather than compulsory. Survey answers reveal that 47 percent of respondents also see this as a factor in school attendance: "the mindset that school attendance is optional and not mandatory."

The limited scope of the survey question does not allow for clarification of who respondents believe to have this mindset. Nor could we verify whether this perception is accurate. If this mindset does exist, plausible explanations could be cultural (a population that places a high premium on family life), economic (the financial necessity of having multiple family members work), or both.

While not specified in the survey answer choice, those superintendents who mentioned mindset in the preliminary interviews appeared to associate it with Latino students and families. Some of them noted, for example, that for many Latinos, family and work take priority over school or other considerations: "Traditional families do not feel that students should go to college, but that they should go to work instead," said one. Another stated that for many migrant families, "it's a cultural issue — success is having a job, not school."

Forty-four percent of respondents believe that "returning to Mexico for long vacations" and 38 percent that "returning to Mexico for part-time residence" are factors in attendance and enrollment changes. One superintendent from a district close to the border notes that on "Mondays and Fridays [students] return to Mexico for extended weekends." These two reasons reinforce the perception that some families view school as "optional" and give higher priority to visiting family in Mexico than to attending school.

Thirty percent of districts cite some form of increased communication with parents as a successful strategy for countering the idea that school is somehow optional. Implicit here, too, is the perception that Latino families place a higher priority on family and work than on school. Five respondents specifically state that they impress upon parents the importance of daily

attendance, while another five mention home visits. Other strategies include communication with families through phone calls, home-school liaisons, and "parent training" courses. Six districts also mention the use of Spanish in some way, from hiring a bilingual attendance officer to providing more materials in Spanish. Research studies support such parental outreach activities as a means of bolstering student attendance and participation.[27]

Day-crossers pose unique challenge.

Further complicating attendance issues in those districts closest to the border is the fact that some students live in Mexico but cross into the U.S. daily to attend school.[28] One superintendent notes that up to 40 percent of his elementary school students and 15 percent of his high school students may be day-crossers. While it is illegal for schools to deny students an education based on immigration status, it is also illegal for students to attend school in the United States without first providing a valid address for the district in question.[29] Across the 12 percent of La Frontera districts that report having students who cross the border daily, some district officials view it as their job to educate all those who come to their door while others choose to enforce the residency regulations. As one district leader noted in an interview, "I don't know the role for the district — should it be policing for illegal students? Our district takes all students who show up." Enforcement can be costly: one superintendent says he needs 16 hours of staff time per week just to track residency issues. Another superintendent initially tackled enforcement by taking his teachers to the local border crossing in the morning and asking them to identify students as they crossed into the country; he then issued a deadline for those students to establish a valid local address or be expelled. District staff in that district now do random residency checks by going to a student's alleged residence in the morning to see if the student is actually there.

While some superintendents are reluctant to enforce the residency requirement because of the financial burdens of policing students and/or the additional paperwork and workload, some may also wish to avoid the loss of funds that could accompany a drop in student population. One superintendent mentioned a "scandal" in the past in which one district sent buses over the border to get students from Mexico in order to bolster enrollment. But for some there is clearly a sense of obligation to educate all children, especially in those communities that straddle the border. One superintendent lamented the loss of Mexican students after the September 11 security

crackdown. He noted that "these are kids who are doing well in school most of the time; these are not the troublemakers. They want to be in school. It's heartbreaking [but] we have people in the community saying those kids shouldn't be educated in the U.S."

V. FAMILY AND STUDENT NEEDS

School districts across the U.S. are required to offer certain support services to students who need them, such as special education, speech therapy, and free or reduced price meals. Most La Frontera districts offer all of the above (99%, 96%, and 94%, respectively).

But a number of these border districts manage to provide many more services than are required and/or funded by the federal government. Operating on the premise that students cannot learn if they are not physically and mentally healthy,[30] they have assumed the responsibility of offering a range of support to help ensure students' readiness to learn.[31] In this effort, many also recognize the value of meeting family needs as well. Health care and other social services are often hard to come by for those living in isolated rural communities. Sometimes the services simply do not exist locally. In La Frontera, 12 percent of the districts responding to this survey say there are no general health care services available in their community; in some districts, the nearest hospital or health clinic is 80 miles away. Thirty-one percent do not have dental services[32] available locally, and 26 percent have no mental health screening or services.

Lack of health-related services would be a problem in any community, but the problem is aggravated when local living standards are so poor as to compromise residents' physical health. Such is the case in many areas of La Frontera closest to the border, where cramped and unsanitary living conditions contribute to rates of hepatitis A, tuberculosis, measles, mumps, and rubella that are significantly higher than the national average.[33] The most obvious example of an unhealthy physical environment for children and families are the *colonias*, but similar harmful living conditions exist, if less extremely, elsewhere in La Frontera.

In La Frontera, mental heath issues are also a factor. According to the U.S. Surgeon General (1999), nearly 21% of American children between the ages of nine and 17 suffered from a diagnosable mental or addictive disorder. In the border region, with its large proportion of

immigrant families, this age group may be even more susceptible to mental health problems. Numerous studies support the idea that many immigrant students have specialized mental health needs related to high stress, alienation, cultural barriers, and questions of self-identity.[34] Yet 26 percent of survey respondents report that no mental health screening or services are available in their community, either through the schools or through any other public or private endeavor. Concern about the need for such services is evident in interview and written response comments, such as: "[We have a] high percentage of students with emotional issues," "Counseling [is a] great need among students," and "[We need] crisis counseling services ... our community has suffered several crises that directly affect our students."

Even when health care services do exist in a community, they may still be out of reach to those who have no insurance and not enough money to pay out of pocket — a common problem in the border region.[35] Similarly, even some affordable public services may effectively be unavailable to those with limited English skills or those who are wary of seeking help from public agencies because their immigration status is questionable.

In contrast to many other public institutions, schools are often viewed as benevolent and accessible places to seek help or information. This is in part because of the general trust that parents have in school staff, as well as because of schools' accessibility and convenience.[36] In addition, schools are legally restrained from asking for immigration documentation.[37] Therefore, when schools provide social services, they are often able to serve families who need such services but might otherwise not seek them. Given their own financial constraints, districts are generally hard-pressed to provide services on their own. Instead, they tend to team with universities and other public agencies. To address health care, for example, a district may provide the space while a partner agency funds the actual services provided through the health clinic or wellness center. The majority of La Frontera districts provide four to 10 different social services for students and, in some cases, their families.[38] Among them are: general health care (23%), dental care (12%), mental health screening and services (30%), substance abuse counseling (38%), and crisis counseling (57%). District leaders have also recognized that limited language skills, substance abuse, lack of information about U.S. schools, and other factors can prevent parents from actively supporting their children's schooling. As one superintendent

voiced, districts are realizing that "home issues brought to school disrupt learning; if the district can affect the home, we have a better chance of reaching students."

Because many La Frontera families are non-English speakers, the majority of districts offer English language courses (73%) and English translation services (63%). An Arizona superintendent said, "Parents don't speak English, so it is difficult for them to get services they need." One district has hired bilingual wellness and outreach coordinators to help counter language barriers. Over a third of districts (38%) provide substance abuse counseling to students and/or families because "it's a critical issue" and "many families or relatives are drug dependent." A majority of districts (58%) also offer classes designed to inform immigrant parents about the nature of schooling in the United States, hoping to encourage informed decision-making and involvement. In what exemplifies a comprehensive approach to student and family support, one La Frontera district reports pooling resources from 90 agencies to create a one-stop shop for services. There, families can get help with employment and social security issues, receive health- and child-care services, and even get driving instruction. The stated goal of this collaborative effort is to "help families become more independent."

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study has yielded a broad overview of the challenges facing school districts along the U.S./Mexico border and of the priorities of these districts. Drawing from their voices and from the research, this section highlights related policy implications. It also notes some areas worthy of further study.

Districts offering social services need support themselves.

Recognizing the connection between student health, school attendance, and readiness to learn, many La Frontera districts are providing or would like to provide a range of social service support for students and their families. Similar efforts have been underway in districts and schools throughout the United States for many years, and there is a substantial body of literature documenting practices, models, and successes. It would be helpful to explore this research and distill and disseminate those learnings — including possible models such as full-service schools — that would be most applicable to La Frontera districts.

Identifying methods for easing the teacher shortage.

Given the shortage of qualified teachers, state licensing policies should be revisited to explore possible revisions that would allow more teachers into the profession while maintaining reasonable standards. For example, there might be value in creating greater reciprocity for teaching credentials, both state-to-state and with Mexico. Similarly, it might be worth exploring the possibility of creating reciprocity for teacher retirement plans. Other policies and practices warranting further exploration include alternative certification for mid-career professions and more formal "grow-your-own" teacher programs. For retention purposes, attention should focus on support for beginning teachers (e.g., induction programs) and for more experienced teachers throughout their teaching careers (e.g., job-embedded development opportunities and teacher leadership training).

Identifying creative ways to increase student attendance.

Many La Frontera districts experience high fluctuation in student attendance and enrollment. Among the causes are such factors as job availability for parents and local economic conditions. Nonetheless, districts can do much to make schools more attractive to students and their families. They can do this by adopting practices that make students and families feel welcome(e.g., making sure language is not a barrier, doing more outreach to parents, offering extracurricular activities and support services). Equally important, they can continue to make the curriculum as engaging and relevant as possible.

Further analysis of quantitative data and of state and federal policies.

Extensive quantitative analysis utilizing student achievement and demographic data should be explored, to supplement the qualitative finding presented here and to more closely examine similarities and differences between La Frontera regions and the rest of their respective states. In addition, the multitude of state and federal policies that influence all aspects of education at La Frontera need to be studied. At times, these policies conflict with one another, putting additional stress on school districts unsure how to uphold the spirit of different laws and regulations. To untangle these myriad state and federal requirements, a state-by- state analysis is necessary to map what is required and what resources — fiscal and technical — are available in each state to

help districts address the requirements. It would also be useful for professional organizations like state school boards associations to identify conflicts among existing regulations and explore potential resolutions in preparation for discussions with state and federal policymakers.

Examining implications of the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001.*

The NCLB, which was adopted after completion of the La Frontera survey, further complicates the policy picture for these districts, because it incorporates additional and more stringent requirements in such significant areas as teacher quality and student assessment and accountability. This landmark legislation needs to be thoroughly analyzed state by state to fully understand its potential impact on La Frontera districts in terms of both the opportunities and the challenges it presents. Much of the work to be done in supporting La Frontera districts is best carried out at the state or regional level. But, it is important to remember that a number of La Frontera districts have been successful in addressing some of the challenges described in this study. All districts should be encouraged to share their knowledge — both their successes and their failures. They should be supported in doing so through the creation of such regionwide forums as online communities, a newsletter, or topic-specific conferences. Another obvious means for districts to exchange and further develop relevant knowledge is their greater participation in the four-state School Boards Associations network, which sponsors the annual "Celebrating Educational Opportunities for Hispanic Students" conference.

Endnotes

[1] A description of the demographic, social, and economic landscape of La Frontera is not easily drawn from ready-made sources. In most cases, the geographic focus of existing research is not congruent with the geographic area defined for this study. Thus, knowledge about the 100-mile-wide region running the length of the 1,951-mile U.S./Mexico border must be pieced together by searching — and in some cases extrapolating from — diverse demographic studies, ethnographic research, economic analyses, and other research studies. The challenge is compounded by the fact that each of these studies tends to take a slightly different focus, geographically and/or by issue. For example, a number of researchers have examined the growth and persistence of the *colonias* that exist to some degree in each of these four states, but little has been done to document less extreme forms of rural poverty or life among the middle class in these areas. And while it is possible to find good economic information about the border region in Texas, such information is not readily available for that area in the other three states. Similarly, ethnographers have documented educational practices at particular schools, but no one has tackled a comprehensive study of education on the border.

[2] U.S./Mexico Border Counties Coalition (2001).

[3] U.S./Mexico Border Counties Coalition (2001).

[4] For the purpose of this study, a Latino/Hispanic person is one whose family and home background includes native speakers of Spanish. Their ancestors might have immigrated to the United States from Mexico or the Caribbean, including Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Latinos (a) may be of any race, (b) may or may not be limited-English proficient, and (c) may or may not be American born.

[5] U.S. Census (2000).

[6] Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (June 2001); E. Garcia (2001); U.S. Department of Education (1998).

[7] Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (June 2001).

[8] The other ethnic groups in the border region include 4% African American and 1% other; the non-border region has 14% African American and 3% other (Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts 1998).

[9] Arizona (32%), California (32%), New Mexico (42%), Texas (32%). (U.S. Census 2001).

[10] Among the differences is whether one is U.S.-born or an immigrant and, if an immigrant, permanency of residence, immigration status, and length of time in the U.S. Other variables include socioeconomic status, academic background, and, for students, the English language skills and education profiles of their parents (G.N. Garcia 2001; DeLeon and Hoffman 1998). Those Latino students who are, themselves, immigrants bring a range of education experiences. Some have had very limited exposure to formal schooling before arriving in the U.S. while others are ahead of their U.S.-born peers in some academic areas (Lucas, Henze, and Donato 1997).

[11] Garcia, G.N. (2001).

[12] Garcia, G.N. (2001); U.S. Department of Education (1998).

[13] Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (2001); U.S./Mexico Border Counties Coalition (2001).

[14] U.S./Mexico Border Counties Coalition (2001).

[15] U.S./Mexico Border Counties Coalition (2001).

[16] Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas (2001).

[17] Henneberger, J. (2000).

[18] To protect the identity of respondents, the male pronoun is used in all references to or quotes from superintendents.

[19] Blair, J. (2003, January 9a).

[20] Olson, L. (2003, January 9).

[21] Blair, J. (2003, January 9b).

[22] Sack, J.L. (2003, January 9).

[23] Sandham, J.L. (2003, January 9).

[24] "Alternative certification" includes teacher preparation programs for those who may already have a bachelor's degree and are interested in pursuing a teaching career.

[25] The federal government provides funding to state educational agencies to be used for supplemental education and support services for migrant children. Students are eligible for funding if they have moved during the last 36 months because they or members of their family were trying to obtain temporary or seasonal employment in agriculture, dairy, fishing, or logging activities. The law states that migrant education services are a priority for those students, ages three through 21, whose education has been interrupted during the current school year and who are failing, or are most at risk of failing, to meet state content and performance standards.

[26] Migrant students, by the nature of the work of their families, often attend more than one school each year, sometimes live in camps and temporary residences without phones, and have limited family resources (Interstate Migrant Education Council 2001).
[27] Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (2000); California Tomorrow (1997); Romo & Falbo (1996).
[28] Many students crossing the border to attend school are American citizens, allowing them to legally pass through the border daily; in one area of New Mexico, and "overwhelming majority" are citizens (Heinz Bennett & Bennett 1997).
[29] According to the 1982 Supreme Court decision in *Plyler v. Doe*, districts are required to educate all students with a valid local residence, regardless of citizenship or immigration status.
[30] The connection between student health and student achievement has been confirmed by a number of research studies, including Peth-Pierce (2000) and Yee (2001). Dr. Yee, in his research into the relationship between absenteeism and achievement, has found that "healthy children attend school more regularly; they are not distracted by constant pain, physical discomfort, depression, hunger or anxiety; they come to school regularly and ready to learn" (p. 13 in California Assembly 2002).
[31] Friedrich, M.J. (1999); Kaplan, Brindis, Phibbs, Melinkovich, Naylor, & Ahlstrand (1999); Boyd, Crowson, & Gresson (1997); George Washington University (1997); Dryfoos (1994).
[32] The Select Committee on California Children's School Readiness and Health (2002) found that an estimated 51 million school hours are lost each year because of dental-related illness.
[33] *borderlines* (May 1998), p.1. "On the U.S. side of the border, the rate of hepatitis A...occurs at a rate three times the national average...In 1995, the rate of reported TB cases in the four U.S. border states was 13.3/100,000 compared to a rate of 8.7 elsewhere in the country...The rate for measles on the U.S. side, for example, is 50 cases per 100,000 people versus a U.S. national average of 11. And the morbidity for mumps in the region has been documented as high as 41/100,000 (the national average is only 2/100,000). Occurrence of rubella is between six and ten times the national average."
[34] U.S. Surgeon General (2001); Kao (2000); Padilla & Duran (1995).
[35] *borderlines* (May 1998).
[36] Consumers Union (2000).
[37] According to the 1982 Supreme Court decision in *Plyler v. Doe*, districts are required to educate all students with a valid local residence, regardless of citizenship or immigration status.
[38] Data from La Frontera survey, aggregating number of services provided by each district.

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Appendix

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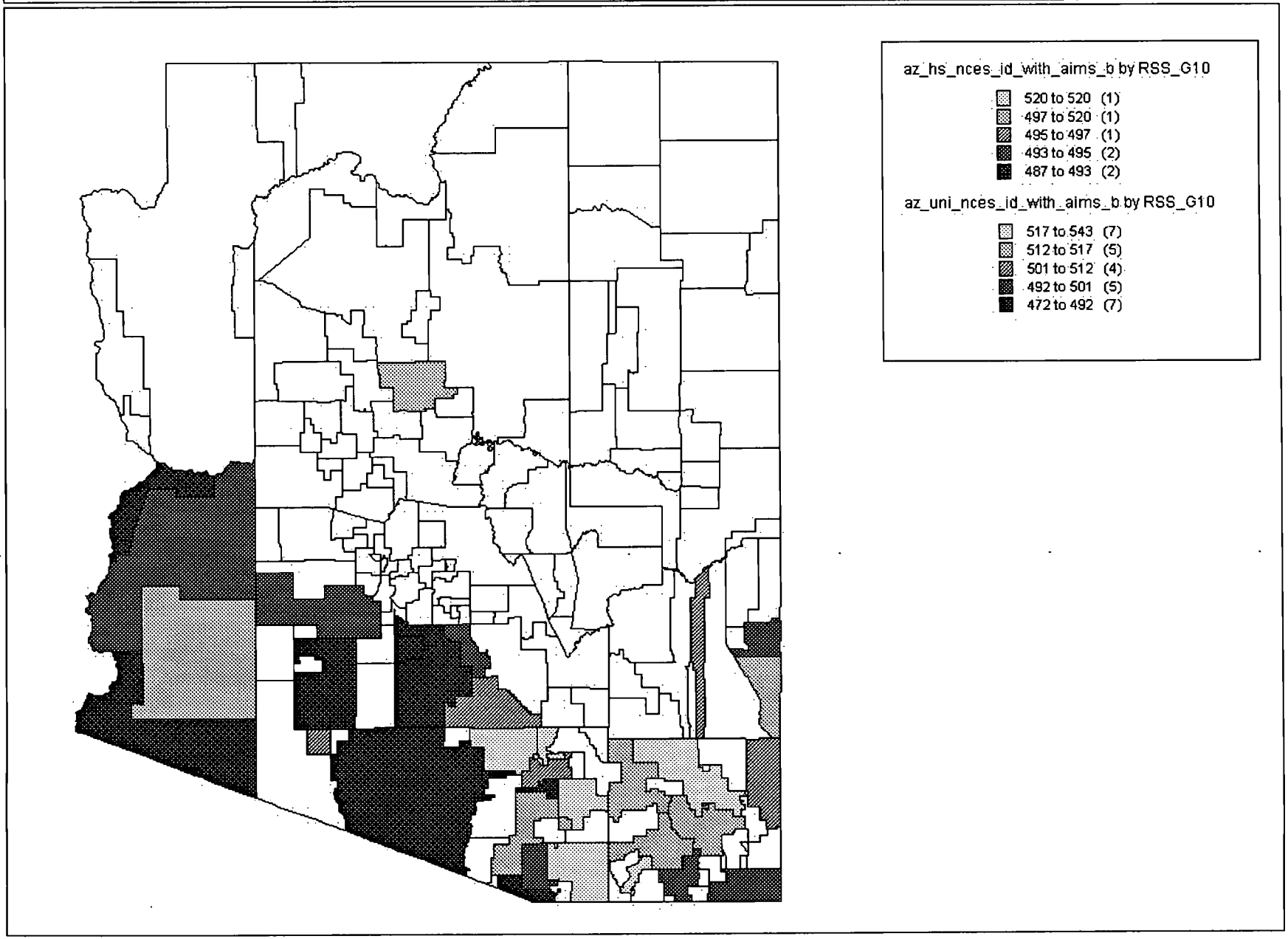

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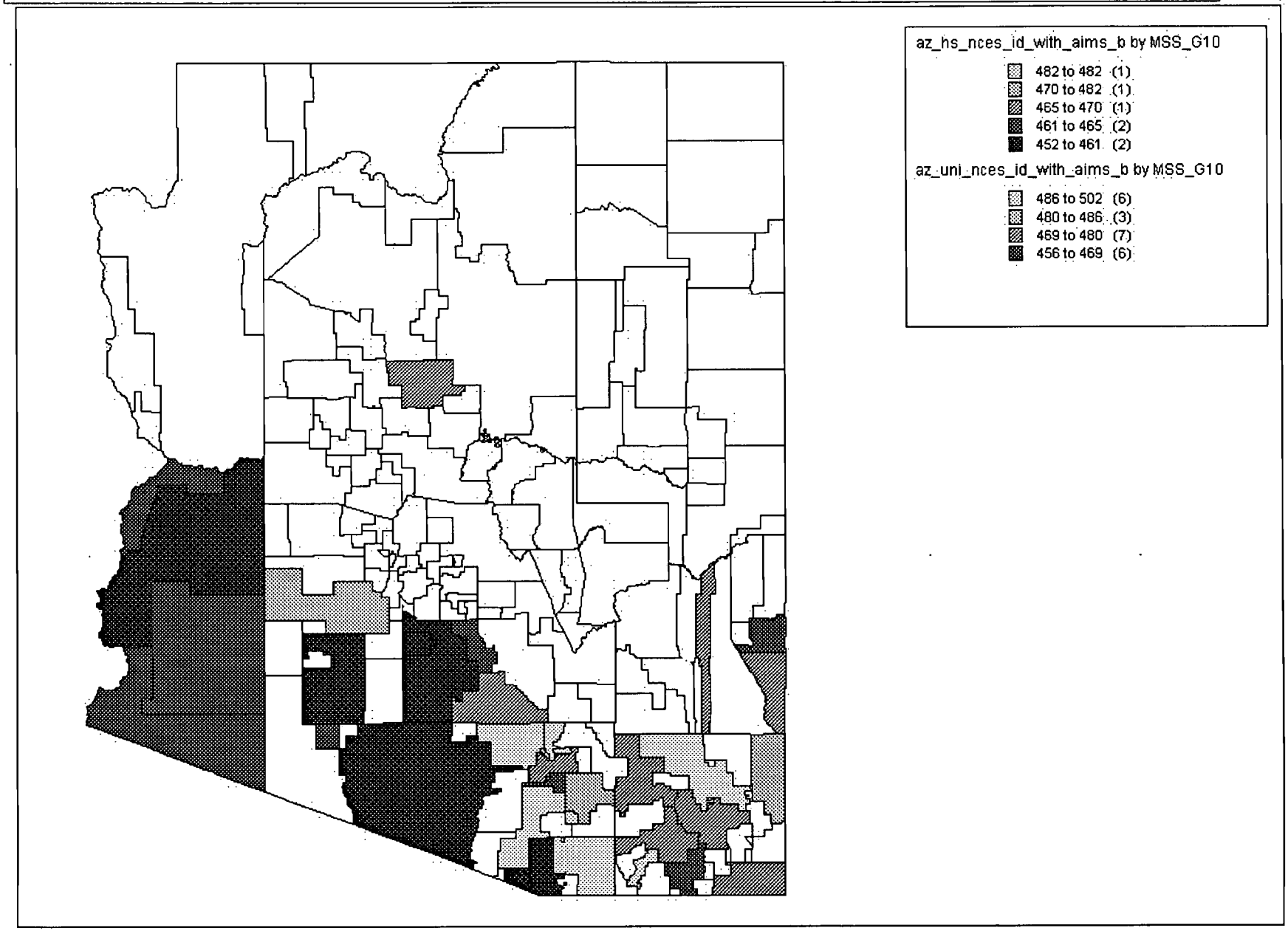

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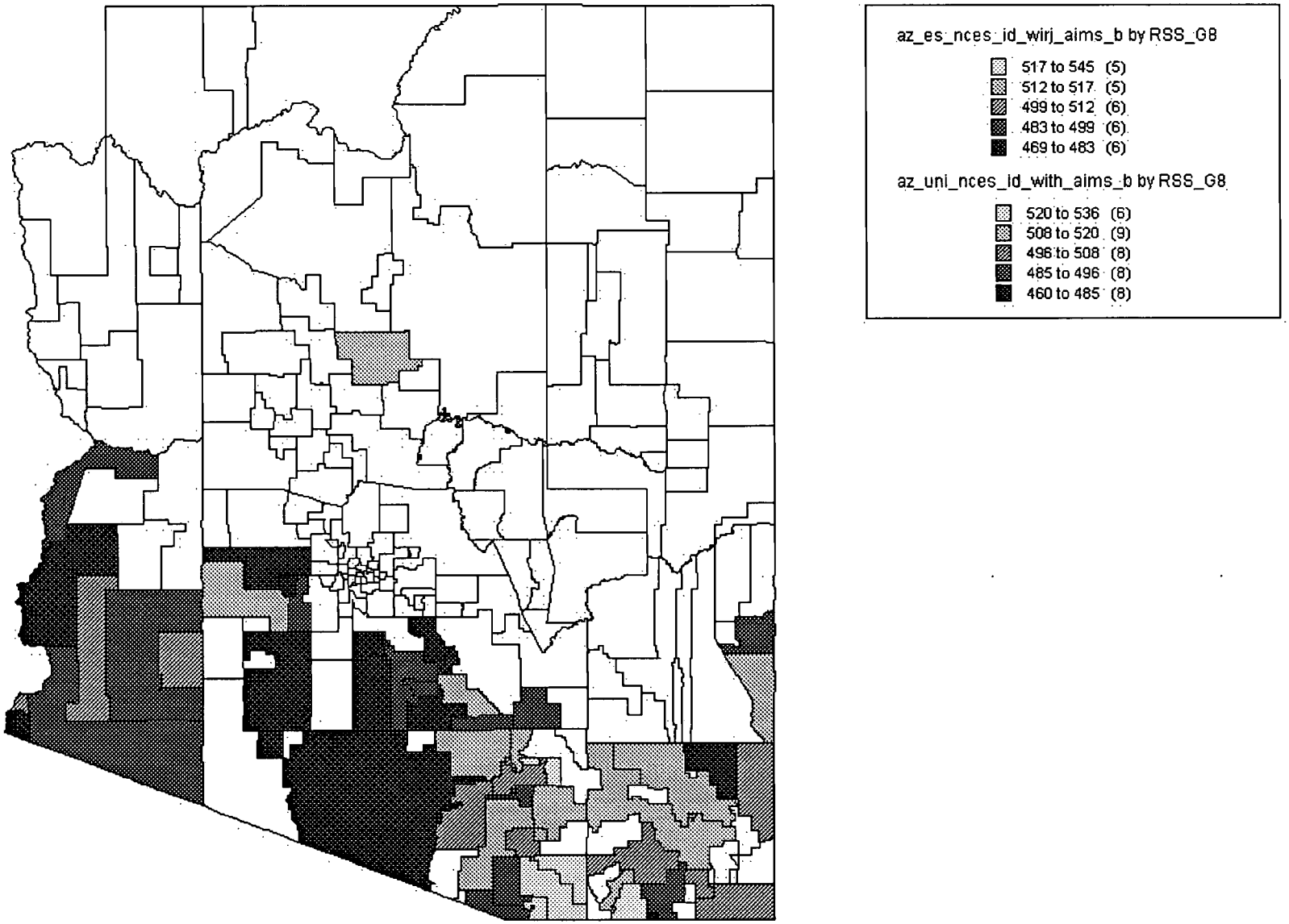

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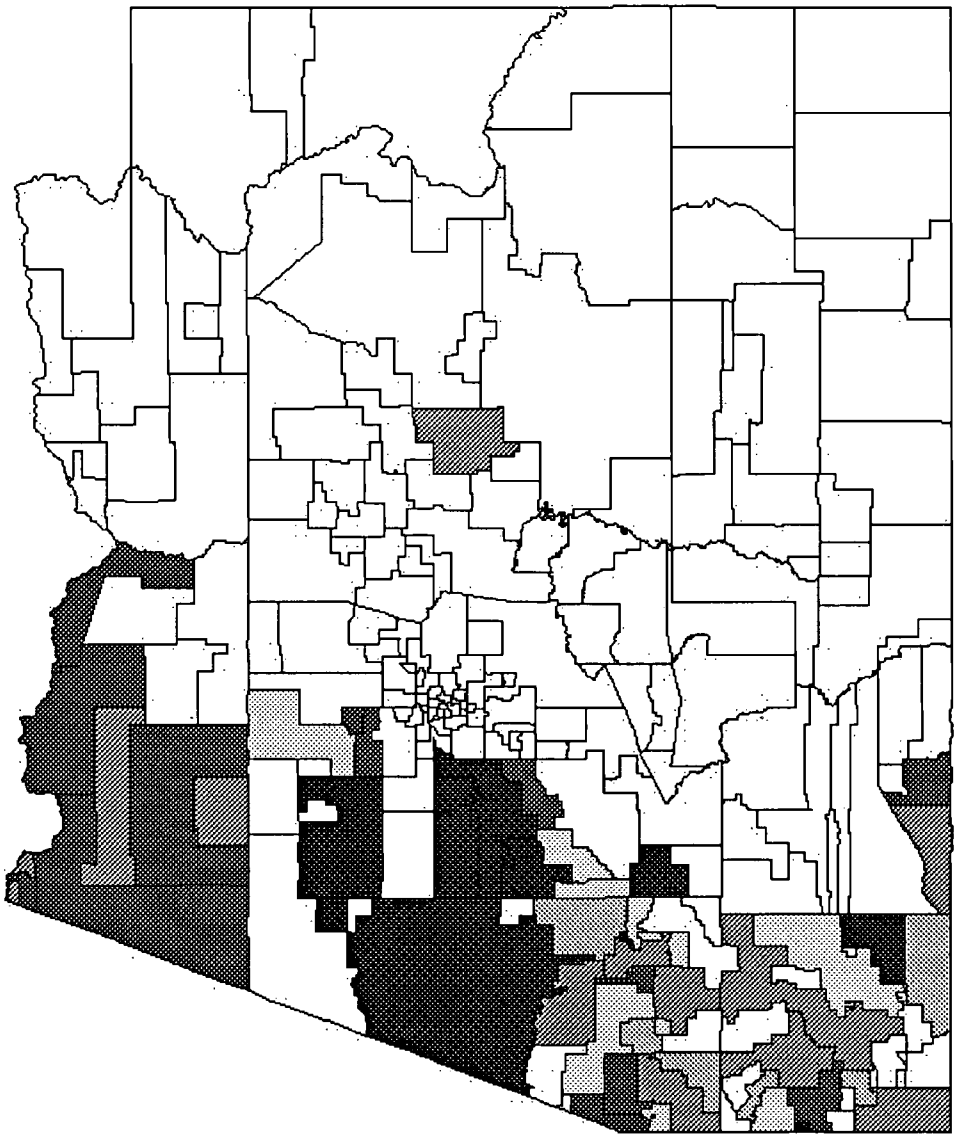

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- 464 to 477 (7)
- 454 to 464 (8)
- 432 to 454 (8)
- 388 to 432 (8)

az_es_nces_id_wirj_aims_b by MSS_G8

- 469 to 490 (7)
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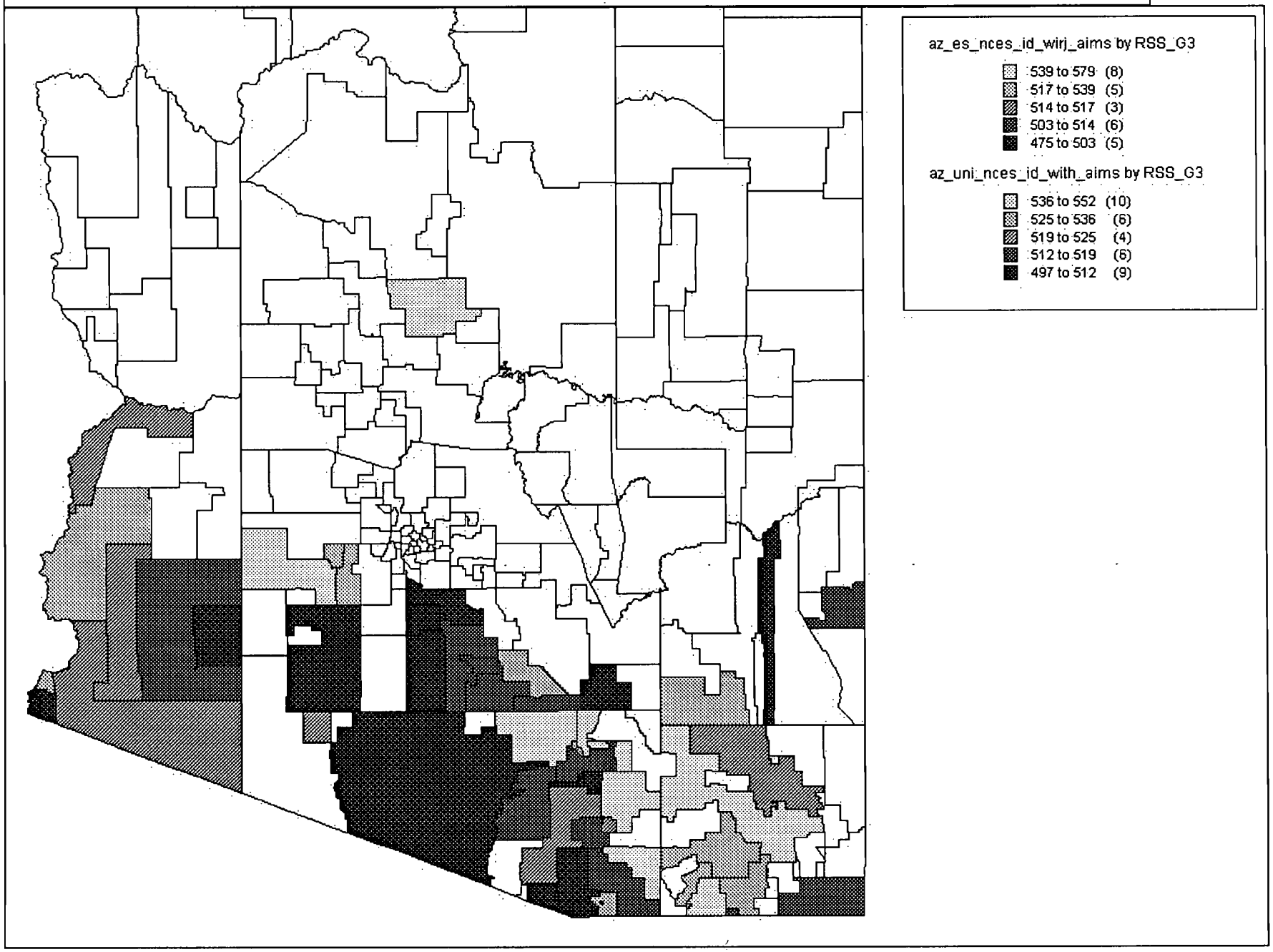
- 438 to 448 (6)

AZ AIMS G3 Reading Scale Scores 2002, La Frontera Elementary & Unified Districts



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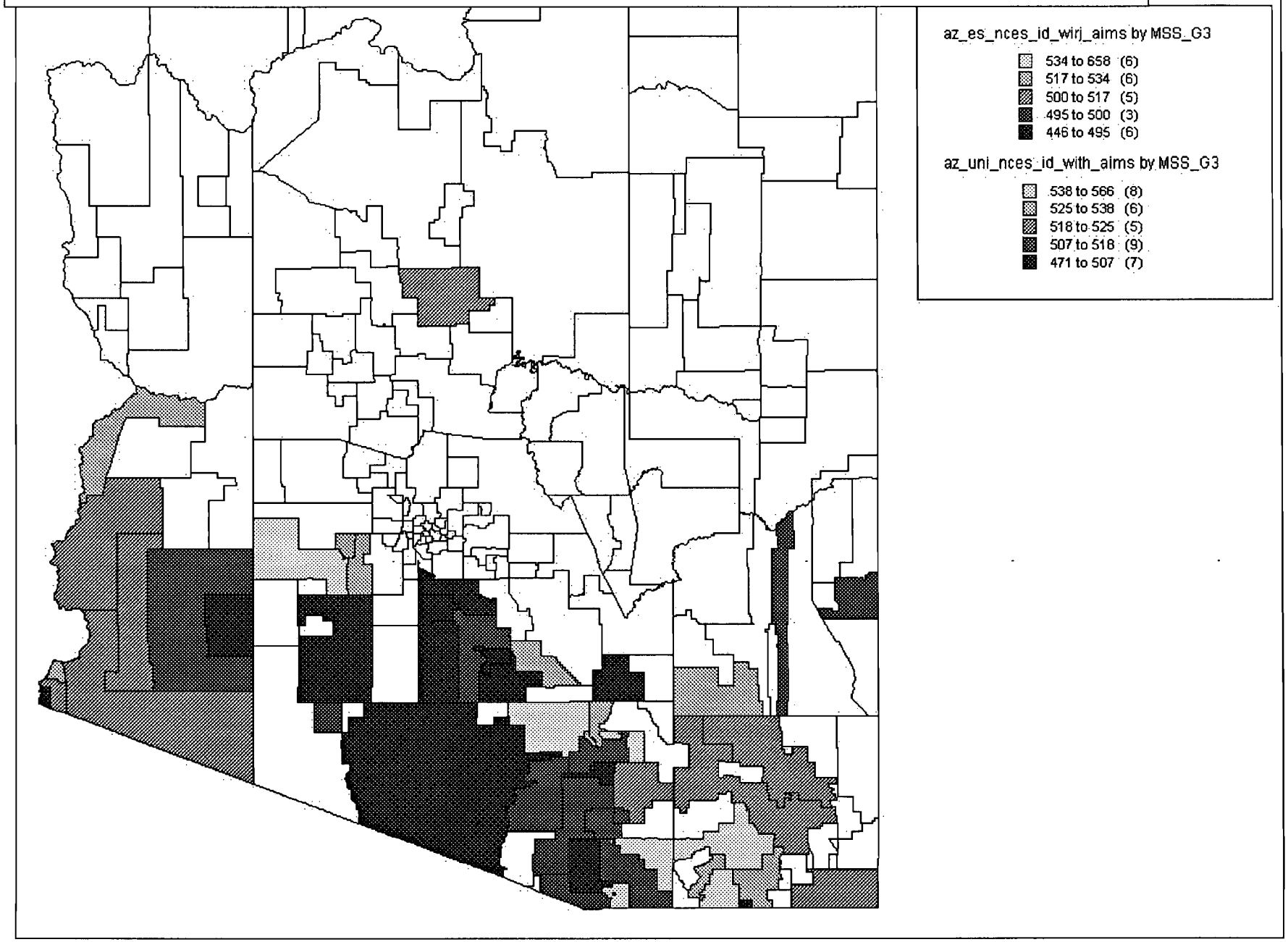
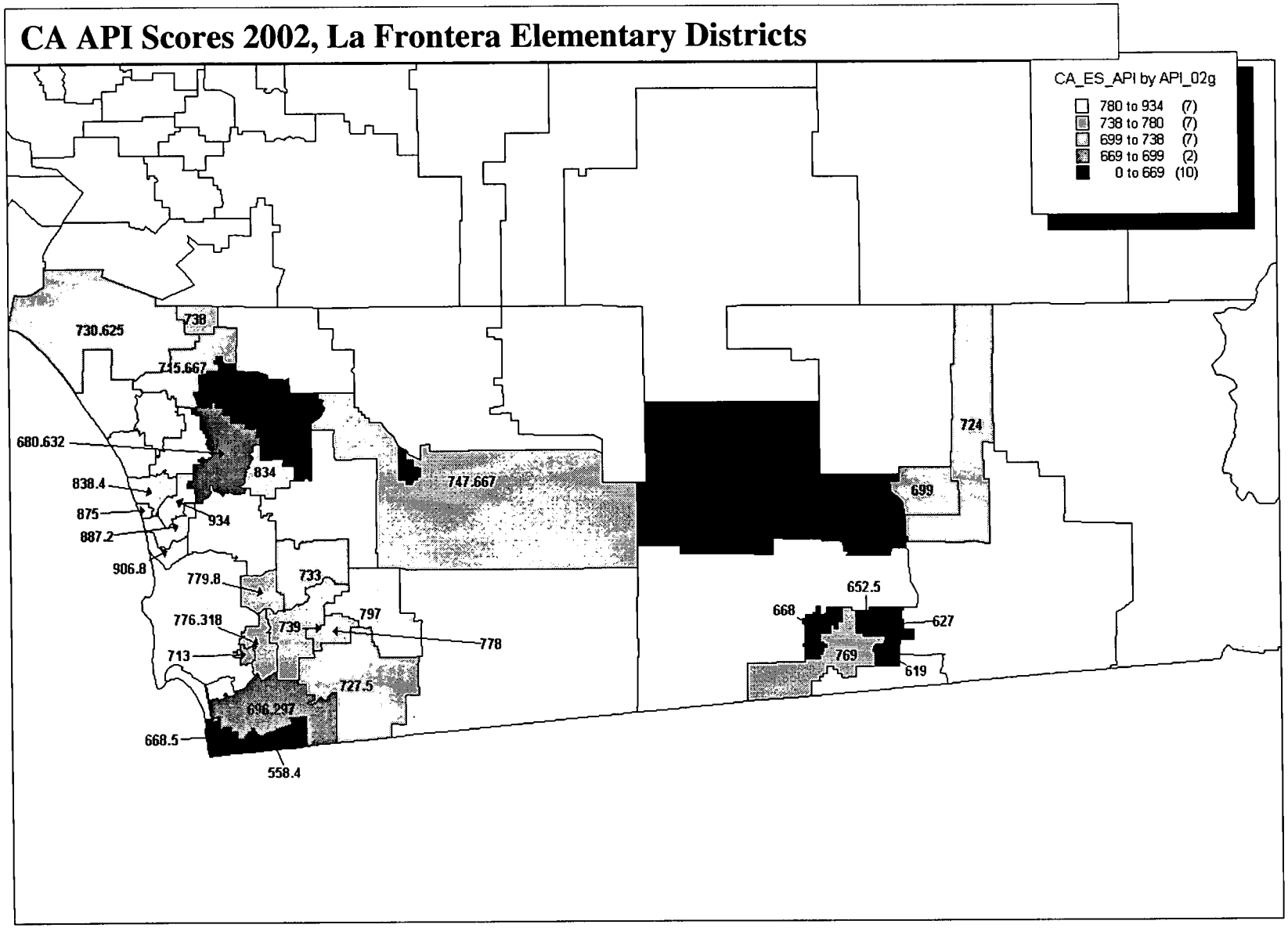
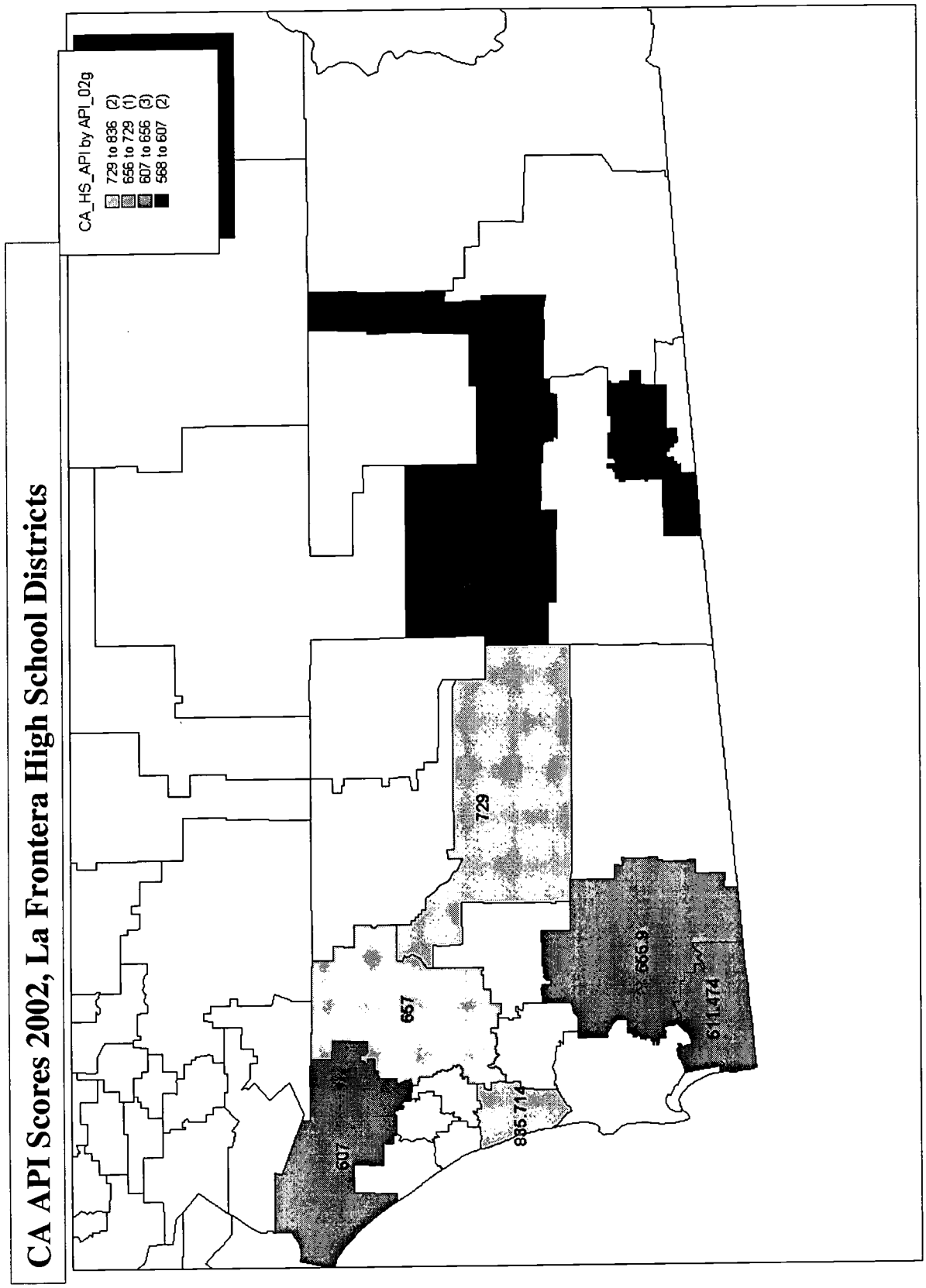
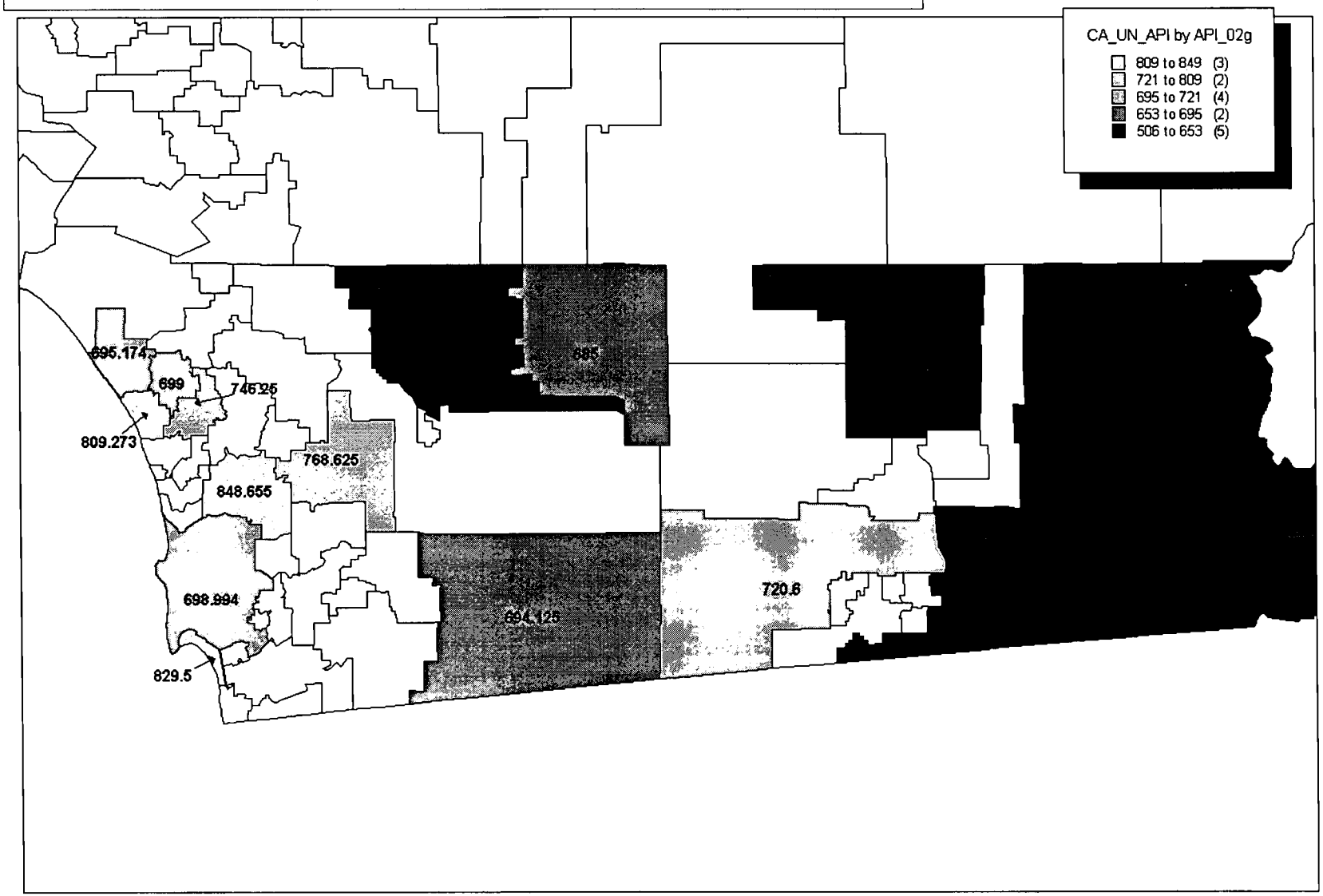






CA API Scores 2002, La Frontera Unified Districts



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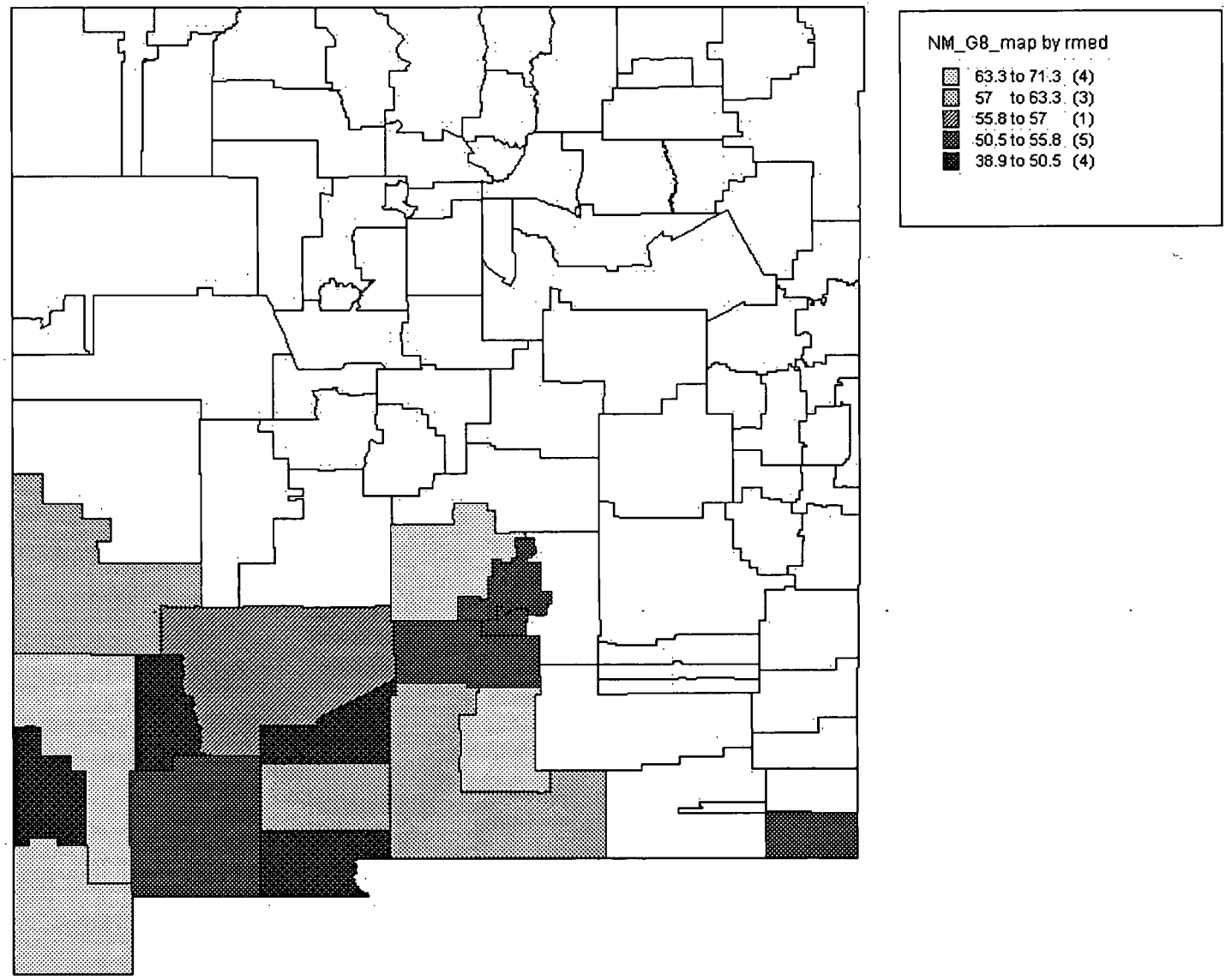

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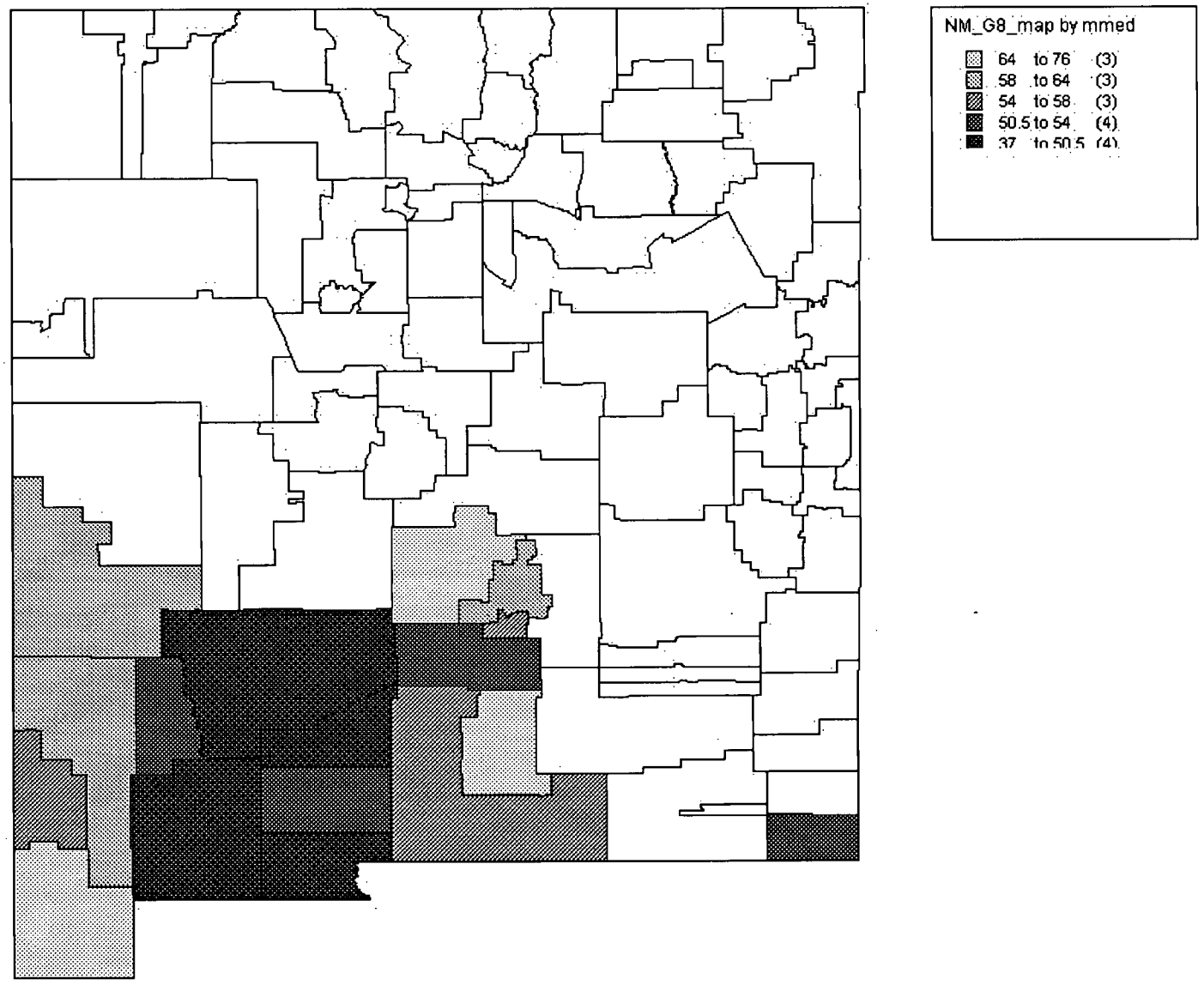

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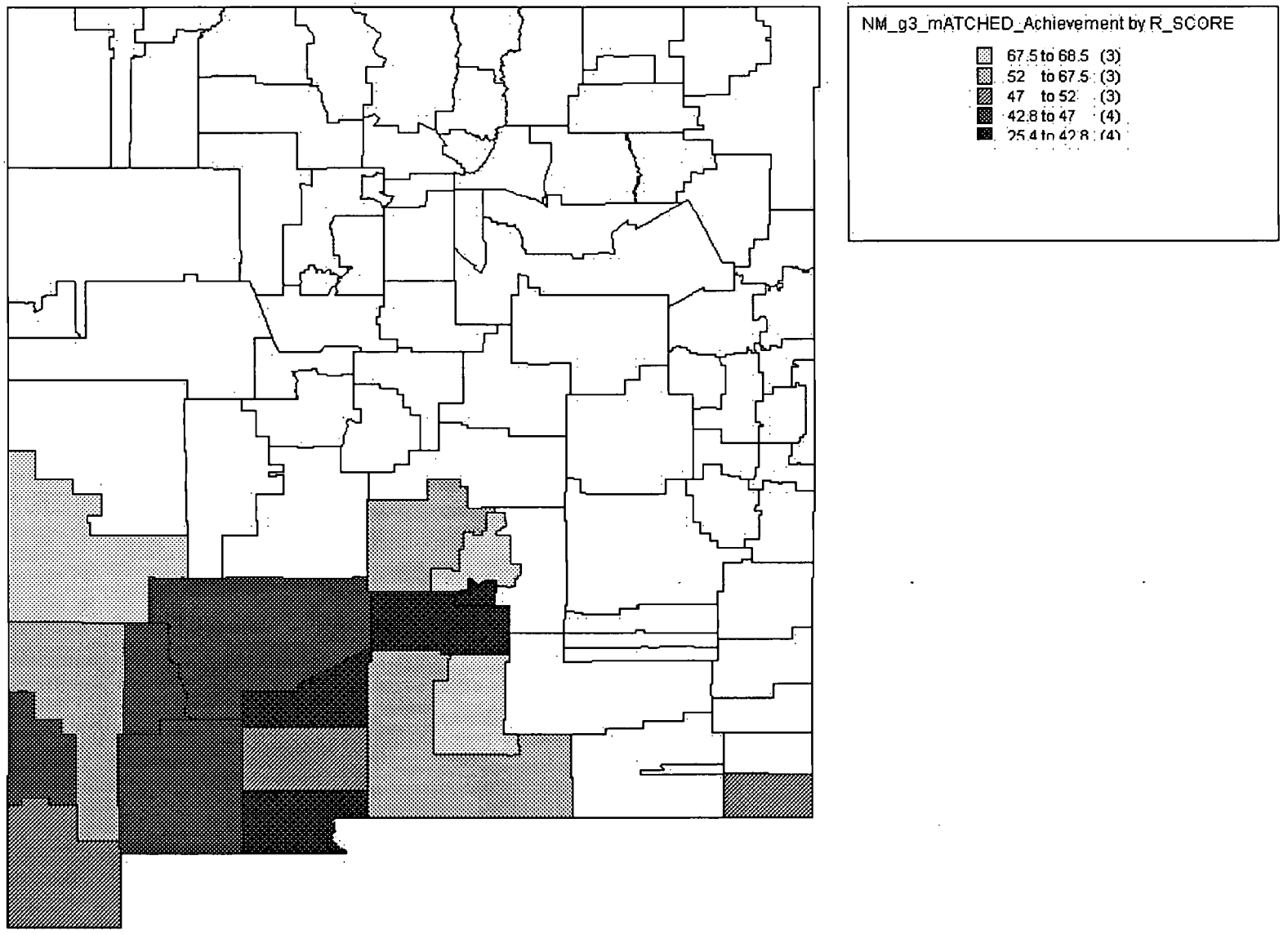
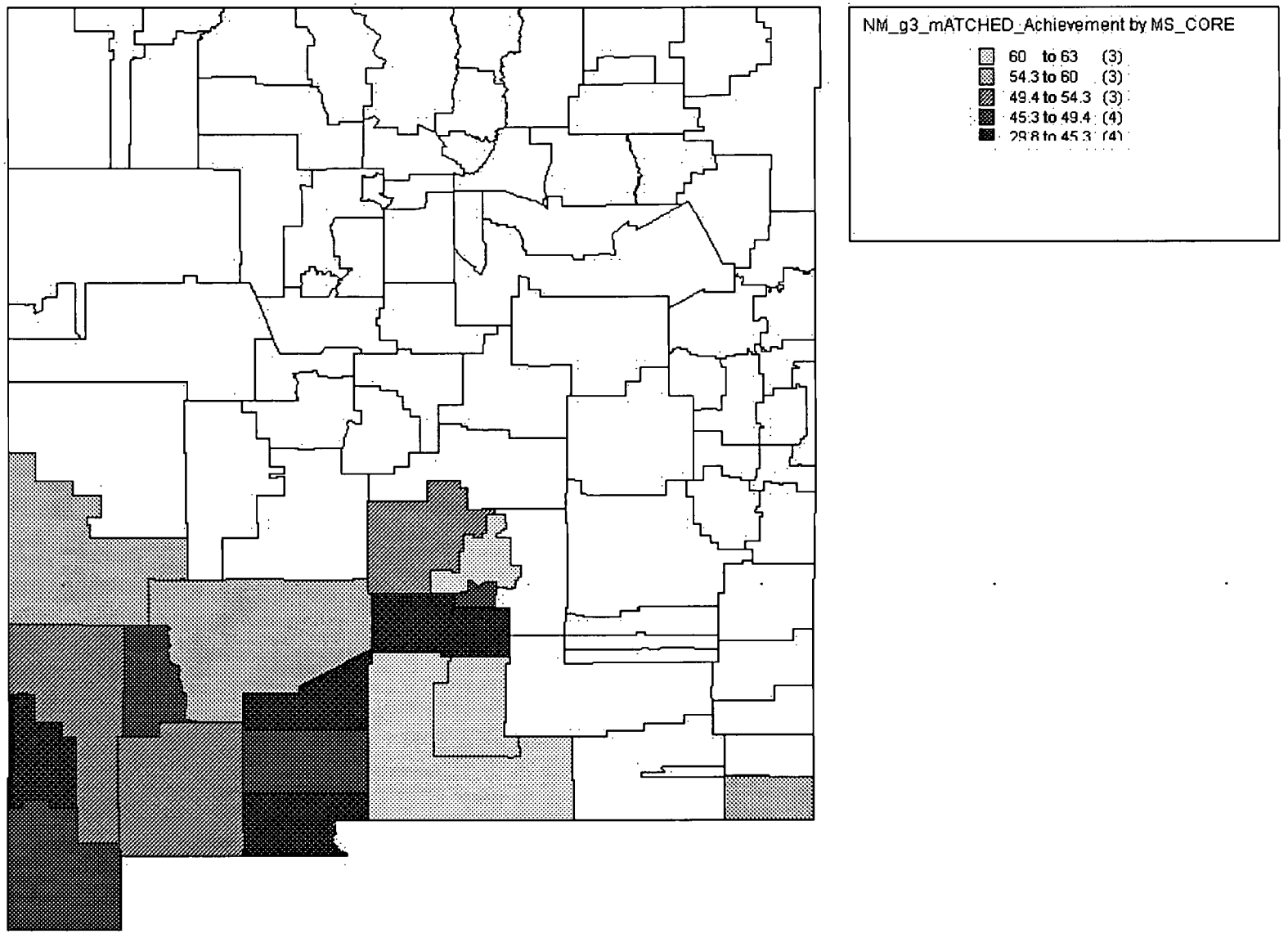
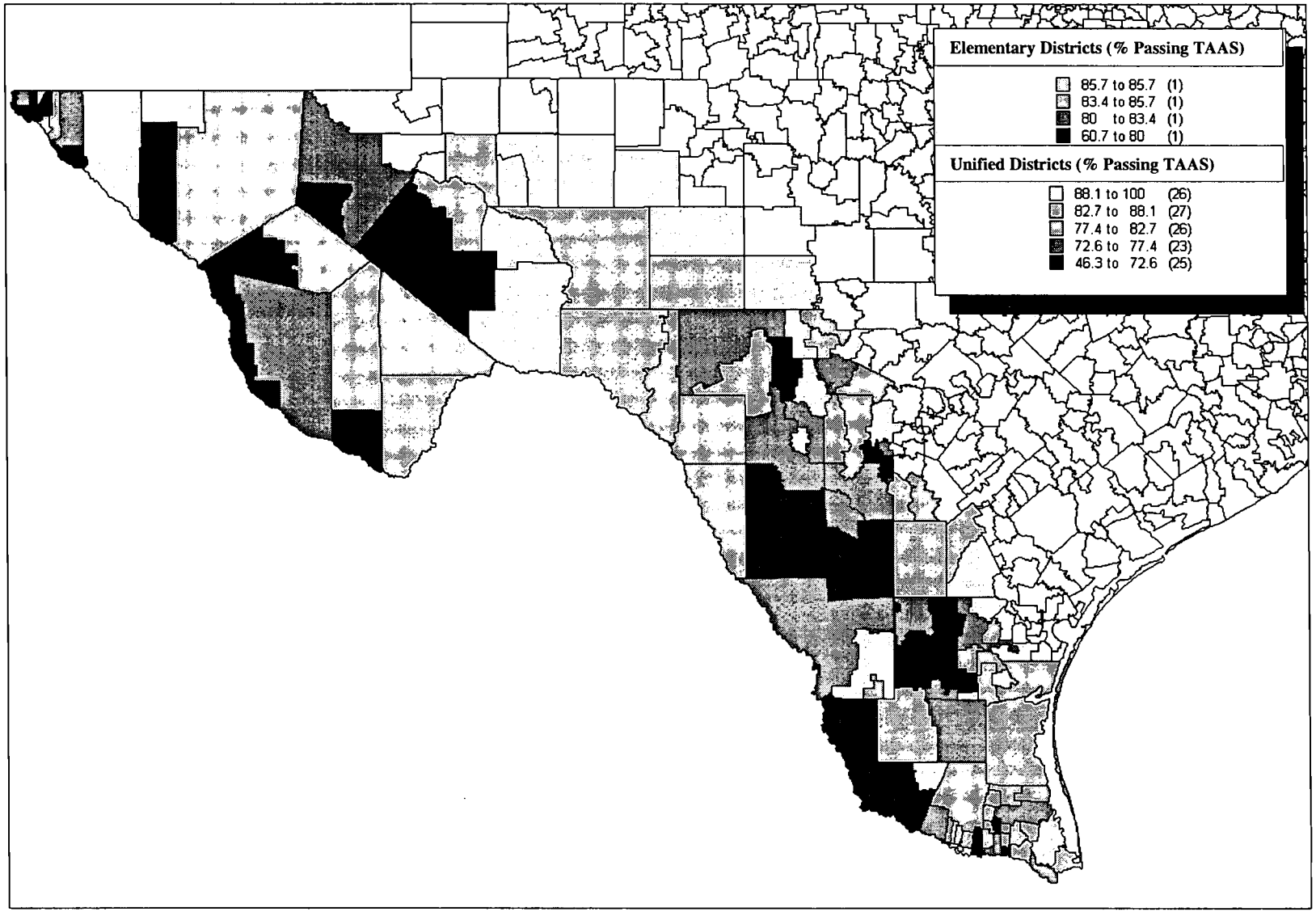


NM G3 TerraNova Math Scores 2002, La Frontera



TX TAAS Scores 2001, La Frontera Elementary & Unified Districts



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