

## Passing rates in N.J. school test inch higher

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New Jersey public school students last year posted small gains in their average state test scores, including some heartening results among low-income and minority children, according to results released today.

With the state tests now given in seven grades, the gains in most cases were minuscule -- amounting to a change of 1 or 2 percentage points in the passing rates -- and there were also a few drops.

But overall, state officials said, the latest results showed schools moving in the right direction, especially in mathematics. For instance, more than 80 percent of third-, fourth- and fifth-graders and 75 percent of 11th-graders were found to be at least proficient. Black and Hispanic students in third grade posted 10-point gains in their math results from the year before.

"We're seeing encouraging trends," state Education Commissioner Lucille Davy said. "My sense is our work in math over the last three or four years is now showing up."

The scores released yesterday also included the first results from new testing conducted last spring in grades 5 through 7. The annual testing showed declines as students get older, including a sharp drop-off between fifth- and sixth-grade results that officials yesterday attributed to the transition from elementary to middle school.

Overall, the state reported the following passing rates on each grade's test:

Third grade: language arts, 82.5 percent; math, 86.9 percent

Fourth grade: language arts, 80 percent; math, 82.4 percent; science, 82.3 percent.

Fifth grade: language arts, 85.9 percent; math, 81.7 percent.

Sixth grade: language arts, 75 percent; math, 70.8 percent.

Seventh grade: language arts, 80.2 percent; math, 64.2 percent.

Eighth grade: language arts, 74.3 percent; math, 64.5 percent; science, 79 percent.

11th grade: language arts, 83.5 percent; math, 75.9 percent.

Districts received their individual schools' scores several months ago, leading to celebration, concern or a combination of the two. Over the last several years, the results have carried especially high stakes under the federal No Child Left Behind act, which sets specific passing rates for all schools.

Among those celebrating were officials at West Essex Regional Schools, where the scores in both eighth and 11th grades rose last year. More than 90 percent of the district's 11th-graders passed, including more than 40 percent found to be advanced in math.

"To know through an assessment that what we've been doing has made a difference is very important," interim Superintendent Donald Merachnik said. "It is really a feather in the cap for teachers, administrators and for parents."

The state's announcement of the scores came amid the debate between the Corzine administration and the Legislature over how to best fund New Jersey's public schools and ease the high cost for schools that is borne by local property taxpayers.

Part of that debate has focused on the billions of state dollars spent on the state's neediest schools, and officials said yesterday the test results showed continued gains in those districts that fall under the Abbott vs. Burke school-equity rulings.

Nearly two-thirds of Abbott students scored "proficient" or better on the math tests, almost double the rate in 1999, when the rulings first took hold. That remains 20 percentage points behind the average scores of non-Abbott schools, but advocates said it was hopeful news, given the current dispute over the Abbott mandates.

"We need to look at this data in more detail, but the report is more encouraging news that the Abbott reforms are having an effect," said David Sciarra, director of the Education Law Center, the Newark group that led the suit on behalf of the special-needs districts. He called for continuing and strengthening those reforms.

#### NARROWING THE GAP

Statewide results of minority and low-income students showed a further narrowing in the so-called "achievement gap," although wide disparities still remain.

"In 1999, 30 percent of our African-American students scored 'proficient' in mathematics in fourth grade," Davy said. "Seven years later, the percentage has doubled. While we still have much work to do, it is encouraging to see these scores moving in the right direction."

The results were tempered by some specific concerns from officials and others. Many of the scores for students with disabilities, for instance, were largely static at best.

Only 52 percent of third-grade students in special education passed the language arts test, and that rate fell to 48 percent in fourth grade.

The high school special education scores in language arts took a precipitous drop, from 65 percent passing in 2005 to 45 percent in 2006. State officials said they were puzzled by the depth of the drop and will further analyze the data.

Others questioned the testing itself.

"We share the concern that special education is not doing as well at the high school level, and some of this may fall into the issue of the best method of assessment," said Frank Belluscio, a spokesman for the state's school boards association.

State officials also said yesterday they requested additional information from 40 districts that saw "unusual" increases or decreases in their scores. The state was caught off-guard last year when huge gains in several Camden public schools exposed a cheating scandal in that district.

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