

Test Scores Plummet as State Raises Standards

by John Mooney
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Changes to New Jersey's elementary and middle school proficiency tests, designed to make them more rigorous, have sent some passing rates plummeting in both city and suburban districts.

The Corzine administration pressed widespread revisions to the statewide tests over the summer, which included new exams in grades 5-7 and far higher scores needed to pass.

At the time, officials warned it could be a jolt to schools and parents who would see fewer of their children deemed "proficient."

They were right.

In Newark, for instance, virtually every elementary school is seeing double-digit drops in the percentage of fifth- and sixth-graders passing the language arts sections — a blow worsened by a district analysis that shows a majority of the schools would have seen gains under the old scoring.

That means nearly 1,000 extra children in each grade suddenly have been deemed not proficient under the new tests, officials said.

In Paterson, it's about 250 extra students per grade, with some schools' passing rates dropping from 50 or 60 percent down into the teens.

And it wasn't just urban districts seeing the impact.

Piscataway is used to more than 90 percent of its children passing the state's tests. The rate on some of the tests dropped below 70 percent.

In the Chathams, schools where virtually all students typically passed, are now faced with some passing percentages in the mid-80s, with special education down to 50 percent.

Districts are finding that special resources devoted to improving basic skills are suddenly insufficient. In the Morris County district, where all students hovering around proficiency or below had received extra help, the changes are hitting the middle school the hardest.

"All of a sudden, we have a lot more than we ever had before, and just two part-time basic skills teachers," said Anne Dudley, assistant superintendent of schools.

"It has led to more professional development for our other teachers and some rethinking of the cut-off," she added, referring to the score change by the state. "We just don't have the staff."

Test scores were not adversely affected across the board, and the full extent of the impact won't be known until the state releases school-by-school scores this winter. But the state this summer estimated language arts passing rates in grades 5-7 could fall as much as 20 percent or more, including barely half of all sixth-graders passing.

Parents often look to the scores to judge the success of a school, but the tests also factor in the way schools are judged under the tough federal No Child Left Behind Act.

The law requires schools hit achievement targets for every category of student; seven straight years of failure can bring severe sanctions. Under the old targets, the state saw nearly 1,000 schools fall short in 2007.

For 2008, the state is waiting for the federal government to approve a plan that would factor in the new tests and scoring, sparing schools from any sanctions as long as their students are making progress.

“Our goal is not to penalize districts,” said Barbara Gantwerk, an assistant state education commissioner. “We have worked very hard to come up with a system that would take into account all these issues.”

RAISING RIGOR

The state required new tests this year starting in both the younger grades and the high schools. The biggest change is in how the tests are scored, part of a reform package approved by the state Board of Education.

Championed by state Education Commissioner Lucille Davy, the changes effectively raised the passing score needed in both language arts and math for grades 5-7. In some cases, the previous bar was so low students needed just 33 percent of the questions correct to be deemed “proficient.”

“This is all part of the department’s efforts to raise the rigor in all of the tests, including in high school,” said Gantwerk, the assistant state commissioner. “And you need to start this in the early grades if we are going to move ahead.”

The new scoring followed nearly a year of planning and feedback, but it came after the tests were already administered. The extent of the impact, then, caught many school officials by surprise.

“When I first saw our scores, I was in shock,” said Marbella Barrera, Newark’s testing director. “We knew it was a different test and it would be more rigorous, but we didn’t know they would be changing the standards.”

Two thirds of Newark’s fifth-graders passed the language arts test in 2007; two thirds failed in 2008. Without the change in the scoring, Barrera said, scores would have held steady for that grade, and half of the schools would have actually seen increases.

Some other local leaders were incredulous. In Piscataway, overall achievement rose in many grades and rose significantly in eighth grade, where the test was barely affected by the changes.

But the improvements may be lost among big drops in other grades, and district superintendent Robert Copeland blamed the state for changing the rules midstream.

“To simply say, ‘Jump higher,’ without providing us anything to help, it doesn’t make sense,” he said. “To say, ‘Jump higher,’ after we’ve already jumped, that really doesn’t make any sense.”