

City's schools get gold star; 74% improve Most 3rd and 5th graders now meet state's math standards

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State test scores rose in 74 percent of Chicago's public schools this year, a boost fueled by double-digit increases in the percentage of 3rd and 5th graders passing math and writing, Chicago officials proudly announced Wednesday.

For the first time in the six years the Illinois Standards Achievement Test has been administered, most 3rd and 5th graders in Chicago met state standards in math. Reading scores in the elementary grades are lagging but still increased.

Chicago also bucked a statewide trend of stagnant high school scores by achieving modest increases in scores on the Prairie State Achievement Examination across every subject. At seven high schools, the passing rate rose by at least 10 percentage points.

"This is an example of the dedication we have to the improvement of our schools," Mayor Richard Daley said. "We all know there is far more to be done before our students outperform other students in the state. But we will not rest. The greatest gift I can give to any child is a good-quality education."

Of the 10 grade schools with the biggest improvements in scores, three were charter schools; among the five high schools with the biggest gains, one was a charter. Charters are poised to become a centerpiece of Daley's ambitious Renaissance 2010 school reform program.

One school, South Loop Elementary, saw an extraordinary gain in 3rd-grade scores--from 19 percent passing reading to 63 percent, and from 18 percent passing math to 77 percent. The changes were so dramatic that school officials suspected cheating, and the 3rd graders had to retake the tests. But the scores held, suggesting that a new principal and changing demographics in this rapidly gentrifying area are having a startling impact on the school's performance.

Latino students improve

Latino students saw big gains across all grades in Chicago, particularly their scores in 5th-grade reading, writing and math. Their improvement helped boost scores among minority students statewide. The city's African-American students also posted solid gains in the three core subjects, but their improvements were far more modest in 5th grade--with reading scores rising 1.3 percentage points, compared with 9.2 percentage points for Latino students.

Despite the better test results, Chicago schools chief Arne Duncan said he expects little change in the number of Chicago schools that must offer students extra help or the chance to transfer because their scores do not meet standards set by the federal No Child Left Behind law. Schools must see improvements over two years to get off the list.

Last school year, 365 of the city's 600 schools had to offer students the option to transfer to a better-performing school because they had not met federal academic goals for two years in a row. After landing on the failing list for three straight years, 219 schools had to offer tutoring.

Duncan said students at struggling schools will receive extra help regardless of whether the schools are required to offer it under the law.

"The lists are irrelevant," he said. "Whether we go up or down, we know we are doing the right thing."

Most encouraging to education leaders was evidence that the district's overall scores are improving, most markedly in the two years since Duncan's management team has taken over the school system.

"The fact that Chicago's gains are outpacing the state's gains is very impressive," said John Easton, executive director of the Consortium on Chicago School Research, a University of Chicago organization that has been studying the issues facing city schools since 1990.

"When I see a big jump like this, I want to wait until next year to see, because these scores do move around quite a bit," Easton said. "But the improvement in math, that's real. It's indisputable."

Driving those math gains were schools such as Little Village Elementary on the Southwest Side. Overall, the school's composite ISAT score jumped from 37 percent passing to 54 percent. Math scores increased twofold or more in 3rd and 5th grades--from 43 percent passing to 92 percent in 3rd grade, and from 34 percent to 68 percent in 5th. The reading score also doubled in 5th grade.

Last year the school adopted a new math curriculum that emphasizes higher-order thinking and hands-on training for teachers. Teachers spend two hours every day working on reading and writing, and they incorporate these literacy skills in their science and social studies lessons.

"We've had a strong foundation, and we've been building brick by brick," said Assistant Principal Elizabeth Najera.

Even the after-school sports program--which covers everything from soccer to folkloric dance lessons--has had a positive effect on the academic progress of the students involved in the activities, Najera said.

A changing neighborhood

At South Loop Elementary, Principal Pat Baccellieri devoted himself in the last two years to building a top-notch teaching staff and selling his school to an increasing number of middle-class families moving to the once-blighted area.

"South Loop until recently was a school of last resort, and [Baccellieri] dramatically changed that culture," Duncan said. "He's really built a culture that focuses on quality instruction ... and a team of teachers truly committed to doing something special."

Baccellieri said the influx of new families has helped bring a new energy, especially in the preschool program and primary grades. But it was the low-income kids who have been at the school for years who achieved the most impressive gains, he said. While reading scores dipped in 5th grade from 30 percent passing to a disappointing 17 percent, some 63 percent of 8th graders passed reading, and 5th-grade math scores increased from 13 percent passing to 33 percent.

Though Daley and Duncan said they still weren't satisfied with the overall performance of high schools, they were encouraged to see that three-fourths of high schools improved their scores slightly in most subjects.

The passing rate at Gwendolyn Brooks College Preparatory Academy, reported at 60 percent last year, rose to 73 percent. That score brings the school more in line with the city's other selective-enrollment high schools, which admit only the system's brightest students.

Instilling motivation

Principal Pamela Dyson said that this year, for the first time, Brooks really tried to sell the importance of the Prairie State test, which is taken by juniors. School officials invited parents to a meeting, hung posters in the halls and even staged a pep rally in anticipation of the April exam.

"If we can cheer our basketball and football teams on to victory, we certainly can cheer our students on to victory on the test," Dyson said.

Hope College Preparatory High School in Englewood was the only neighborhood school to see a double-digit jump in its composite score--from 27 percent of students passing to 40 percent. Duncan credited Principal Mahalia Hines' efforts to make classroom instruction the consuming part of her day--raising expectations and pushing to align lessons with state standards.

"Mahalia is an instructional leader," Duncan said. "This is unquestionably her top priority, and everyone knows it."

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Most improved schools

FOR ILLINOIS STANDARDS ACHIEVEMENT TEST (Grades 3,4,5,7,8)

By percent meeting or exceeding standards

Schools 2004 Score Change from 2003*

1. Locke Charter 60.2% 27.8
2. Carver Primary 62.7% 23.1
3. Haugan 60.8% 21.5
4. Nixon 51.2% 19.5
5. Passages Charter 62.5% 19.1
6. Hammond 51.7% 19.1
7. Hanson Park 62.6% 18.9
8. Whittier 51.2% 17.9
9. Little Village 54.7% 17.2
10. Barry 64.1% 17.1

FOR PRAIRIE STATE ACHIEVEMENT EXAMINATION (Grade 11)

By percent meeting or exceeding standards

Schools 2004 Score Change from 2003*

1. Lindblom College Prep** 55.4% 14.7
2. Chicago Agriculture** 60.6% 13.7
3. Brooks College Prep** 73.0% 13.3
4. Hope College Prep 39.7% 12.6
5. Noble Street Charter 50.7% 12.2

*Percentage point change

**Selective enrollment/magnet schools

Source: Illinois State Board of Education

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