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S.C. students improve in writing, reading

Test results encouraging although some problems persist

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South Carolina's elementary and middle school students showed across-the-board improvement in reading and writing, according to the standardized test that measures whether students are mastering what they are being taught.

But in math, science and social studies, students either held steady or declined slightly in the testing, done last spring. And racial and income achievement gaps persist.

S.C. Education Superintendent Jim Rex said the modest improvements are noteworthy given the state has 4,000 fewer teachers and more poverty among its students – a consequence of the nation's recent, deep recession.

"We were hopeful, in these tough economic times, we would see improvement, and for the most part, that's what we see," said Rex, a two-term Democrat who is not seeking re-election after losing his party's nomination for governor. "The scores are not as good as (they) could be. ... (But) we are making moves in the right direction."

In the Midlands, students showed improvement across most subjects in the eight school districts in Richland, Lexington and Kershaw counties.

Students in Lexington 1, Lexington-Richland 5 and Richland 2 posted some of highest test scores in the state, scoring above the state average in most categories. For example, 90 percent of Lexington-Richland 5 sixth graders passed the social studies test, the highest passing rate among the Midlands districts in any subject.

Last spring was the second year that S.C. students in grades 3-8 took the Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS) test. PASS replaced the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT) as the main instrument by which student achievement and school quality are measured. PASS measures writing skills and proficiency in reading, math, science and social studies.

Better PASS scores drove South Carolina's improved results, announced last week, on the federal measure of school quality – Adequate Yearly Progress – under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Although the percentage of students who met minimum standards is a mixed bag, S.C. students improved their individual performance in 29 of 30 categories, on average.

"In every grade, in every subject with the exception of fifth-grade social studies ... (individual student) scores went up," said Liz Jones, director of the state Education Department's Office of Assessment.

Two persistent problems remain, however.

There is still an often wide achievement gap between African-American and white students in all subjects. The test results also show younger students are still far more likely to meet standards than are older students.

For example, 80 percent of S.C. third graders met or exceeded minimum standards on reading, compared with 63 percent of eighth graders.

Studies indicate students who are strong readers in the third grade have a good chance of academic success throughout school.

African-American students, according to PASS, lag their white counterparts in reading proficiency. Eighty-seven percent of white third-graders met or exceeded minimum standards while 70 percent of African-Americans met or exceeded minimum standards.

That achievement gap is reflected in how local districts performed.

In Lexington 1, for example, 80 percent of white third-grade students met or exceeded minimum math standards, compared with 55 percent of the district's African-American students. The gap is even more pronounced in science, as 71 percent of white students met state standards, compared with 39 percent of the district's African-American students.

"(The achievement gap) is a national phenomenon that has been going on for a long time," Rex said. "It's not an excuse. We need to be the exception in South Carolina."

Lexington 1 said it is making bridging the achievement gap a priority.

"We will continue district initiatives designed to improve learning, including ongoing staff development with strategies addressing the needs of at-risk students," said Gloria Talley, Lexington 1's chief academic officer.

Educators touted PASS as a test better aligned with S.C. curriculum than its predecessor, PACT, and, also, better able to identify a student's weaknesses.

Rex said in Year 2 it is clear to him that PASS will help accelerate student achievement.

"This test is giving teachers more information about what kids know and don't know," Rex said. "And the (state Education) Department is giving teachers more tools to respond to that information."

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