

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

Posted on Tue, Jul. 28, 2009

## PSSA results released early amid budget negotiations

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In the hope of preserving his proposed budget increases in education funding, Gov. Rendell yesterday took the unusual step of releasing state standardized test results weeks early, showing improvement in reading and math scores at all tested grade levels for the first time since he was elected in 2002.

Overall, 72.4 percent of students scored at or above grade level - up from 71 percent last year and 55 percent in 2002.

The results of the tests, administered in the spring, usually are not released until August. The Rendell administration said the announcement was an attempt to counter a Senate Republican plan that would hold the line on basic education spending.

"The fact that for the first time ever in one year we've shown improvement in every category means that our investments are paying off," Rendell said at a news conference in Harrisburg.

"We're proud of what we've done. We shouldn't go back, we can't go back, and we won't go back."

Almost four weeks into the fiscal year, the state remains without a budget as negotiations continue.

Rendell's budget proposal would increase basic education funding by \$418 million or 8 percent, to \$5.64 billion. It is the amount called for in the second year of his six-year plan to boost spending in underfunded school districts such as Philadelphia.

Senate Republicans want to divert \$700 million in state money for education to other areas of the budget, but make it up with federal stimulus dollars. School districts would receive the same basic education funding as this year.

Republicans also point out that increased federal dollars for specific areas such as special education would give school districts a 9.7 percent overall boost in funding.

"That is a remarkable increase anytime, but particularly so in such a tough economy," Senate Majority Leader Dominic Pileggi (R., Delaware) said yesterday. "I am encouraged by the new PSSA test scores, and I believe our budget proposal provides adequate support for public schools to continue improving their results."

Rendell education officials argue that school districts need more funding, not less, for general education needs.

The state did not release scores for individual school districts yesterday; those will be made public later this summer. Following Rendell's announcement, Education Secretary Gerald L. Zahorchak addressed reporters about the statewide results from a special-education leadership conference in Western Pennsylvania.

In both reading and math, he said, the percentage of students performing at or above grade level increased in third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth and 11th grades - all those tested.

The largest percentage jump came in seventh-grade math, up 4.9 points to 75.5 percent. Sixth-grade math rose 3.6 points to 75.9, and fifth-grade reading rose 3.1 points to 64.7.

The smallest increase was in 11th-grade math, which rose only 0.1 of a percentage point. It was also the worst performance area statewide: Only 56 percent of juniors were at or above grade level.

The \$3 billion increase in education spending since Rendell took office has produced dramatic improvements, Zahorchak said.

The percentage of students scoring at grade level in eighth-grade math and reading has increased by almost 40 percent, he said. And the percentage of fifth graders getting the lowest math score dropped by 63 percent; among eighth graders, it dropped by 54 percent.

Zahorchak said he wanted lawmakers to see how spending has paid off.

"We don't want to look back in August and say, 'I wish we had told people about the results while they were making the financial decisions about our state,' " he said.

Some challenge the notion that more spending results in higher scores.

F. Joseph Merlino, principal investigator for the Math and Science Partnership of Greater Philadelphia, said a recent study by his group found no correlation between per-pupil spending and PSSA scores. The group looked at 11th-grade scores in districts across the state.

The percentage of people in a community with a bachelor's degree was a greater predictor, he said.

Zahorchak countered that in 2008, school districts with the lowest per-pupil spending had far more students performing below grade level.

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