

Pa. schools put up record PSSA scores
At grade level: 73.4% in math, 71.3% in reading
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By Eleanor Chute, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A first look at overall scores on the state math and reading tests shows the best results ever, according to state education officials.

The percentage of students scoring at grade level increased in each grade level in both reading and math, resulting in a record amount scoring proficient or advanced on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment exams given in the spring.

In 2002, when only grades 5, 8 and 11 were tested, 51.6 percent were at grade level in math and 58.3 percent in reading.

This spring, when grades 3 through 8 and 11 were tested, 73.4 percent were at grade level in math and 71.3 percent in reading.

In both subjects, there were increases over the previous year at every grade level.

The state considers students scoring proficient or advanced to be at grade level. Those below grade level are basic or below basic.

"We think it's just absolutely remarkable," said state Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak, speaking at a phone news conference from a special education leadership meeting in Bedford yesterday.

He said the improvement is a result of "strategic investments," including preschool, full-day kindergarten, tutoring and efforts to foster adequacy in state funding to school districts.

Dr. Zahorchak provided a glimpse of the statewide overall results as the governor and legislators continue their budget battle, a significant part of which revolves around how much to cut state money for education.

"The implications made by some are [that] we just simply throw money at education without results. That clearly is not the case. We invest money in education and things we know are going to reap results, and that's what we're seeing."

School-by-school results, as well as disaggregate results by race and income, are not yet available but are expected to be released next month.

In three grade levels, more than 80 percent of the students scored proficient or advanced in math or reading: grade 3 math, 81.8 percent; grade 4 math, 82 percent; and grade 8 reading, 80.9 percent.

In four grade levels, fewer than 70 percent of the students were at grade level: grade 11 math, 56 percent, and three grades in reading: grade 5, 64.7 percent; grade 6, 67.8 percent and grade 11, 65.6 percent.

None of the grade levels tested in 2002 -- grades 5, 8 and 11 -- had more than 60 percent of their students performing at proficient or advanced levels.

The state has sent preliminary results to school districts, which have until next week to challenge the data.

Some districts, including Pittsburgh Public Schools, have begun releasing at least some of their results to the public.

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