

## **CSAPs: Kids score, state wins**

Colorado students make greatest strides in six years on CSAP examinations

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The state's students chalked up their best performance in six years on the Colorado Student Assessment Program tests, education officials said Wednesday.

State officials attributed the gains to an increased focus on reading and math in schools across the state and said it's an indication that more students are benefiting from demands that schools be held accountable for educating all children.

According to state Department of Education data, math scores improved in seven of eight grades tested. And, in six of eight grades tested in reading, scores appeared to be on an upward climb. However, only one grade posted a gain in writing scores, while two grades showed a decline and five had no change.

The results show the greatest overall growth in six years, Education Commissioner William Moloney said. That conclusion is based on the state's noting more gains on more tests in the different grade levels from one year to the next, he said.

This is the 10th year of data for the state test, which began in 1997 with fourth-grade reading and writing and now measures how well more than 450,000 public school students meet state standards for math, reading, writing and science. Despite all that data, which have shown some improvement in most grades, there remains sharp disagreement in the state's education community over whether the CSAP has improved classroom results.

"We've adapted CSAP over these 10 years," Gov. Bill Owens said at a news conference to announce the test results. As subjects were added and changes made, educators learned how to use the results to "get feedback so we can improve education," he said.

CSAP "allows us all to be held accountable," he said.

He defended CSAP testing against criticism that it encourages a narrow focus on the subjects tested.

"You start with basic building blocks," he said.

### **Both highs and lows**

Some school districts showed remarkable improvements in some subjects. In Greeley and Montezuma-Cortez, two struggling school districts that saw their state accreditation status put in jeopardy last year by low test scores, students improved.

But results also reveal some sobering trends. An achievement gap of about 30 percentage points persists between the scores of white and Asian students and their black and Latino peers. In the fifth-grade science test, for example, 14 percent of Latino students were proficient in science, compared with 50 percent of white students.

Closing the achievement gap is a top priority for the state, said Jared Polis, a member of the state Board of Education. It's a matter of "raising the bar for everyone's achievement," he said.

### **Money makes difference**

Poverty - or the lack of it - continues to be a major factor in a school's performance on the CSAP.

A Denver Post analysis of fourth-grade reading scores over 10 years identified 40 elementary schools that, since 1997, have consistently ranked in the top quarter of schools for percentage of students at or above grade level. On average, only 5.5 percent of students in those schools last fall qualified for free or reduced-price lunches, an indicator of poverty.

By contrast, an average of 86 percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches at 71 schools that consistently ranked in the bottom quarter, the analysis found.

Most of the schools at the bottom are in Denver or Aurora. The schools at the top are spread out among generally wealthier districts such as Cherry Creek, Douglas County and Boulder Valley.

Those trends are repeated nationwide, noted Mary Fulton, a policy analyst for the Education Commission of the States, a Denver-based national nonprofit that works with policymakers to improve schools. Children born into poverty are behind long before they enter school, she said.

"A lot of it is nutrition, stress," she said. In addition, resources in the home, from prenatal care and the type of nutrition, to the number of

books, or the level of conversation the child is exposed to, are often not as rich as what a middle- to upper-class child would experience, Fulton said.

Lumberg Elementary School in Jefferson County was among those with high poverty and low test scores.

Principal Julie Williams said federal funding for low-income schools helps provide additional tutors and subsidized breakfast and lunch programs to help poor students, but the reality is they come to school behind.

"Most middle-class families take their children to the zoo, to the mountains, on family vacations," she said.

For children in poverty, "those things are not possible."

## **Teachers strategized**

At Rocky Mountain Elementary School in the St. Vrain Valley district, where about 80 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, teacher Michelle Faye described a collaborative effort by teachers to raise student achievement. Performance in some grades and subjects dropped from 2005, but in third-grade reading, proficient and advanced scores jumped an impressive 38 points, to 76 percent. Math scores for fifth-graders also jumped sharply, up 18 points to 63 percent proficient and advanced.

Faye, who appeared at the state's press conference, said teachers met every four weeks to study state data and brainstorm strategies.

"We focus on the child and what they need to learn," she said.

## **Realigning curriculum**

The Montezuma-Cortez school district also made strides. The district was on accreditation watch - a status assigned to districts at risk of losing accreditation for various reasons.

When Stacy Houser took over the the 31,000-student Montezuma-Cortez district during the 2005-06 school year, the curriculum did not align with the reading, writing, science or math standards outlined by the state.

And while the district gave regular assessment tests, teachers were not using the data, said Houser. "There was no strategic plan."

Houser brought about more tutoring, parent-teacher meetings and contracts with parents who agreed to bring their children to school on time, make sure they did homework and send them for tutoring if their grades slipped.

Members of the Ute Mountain Ute Indian tribe also helped with tutoring, he said. A quarter of the district's students are Native Americans.

In the Montezuma-Cortez School District, gains included a jump in 10th grade from 23 percent proficient and advanced on the writing test last year to 42 percent this year. The district's seventh-graders also made strong gains in math, going from 22 percent proficient and advanced a year ago to 35 percent this year.