
New York Times

Bush Education Law Shows Mixed Results in First Test

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 19 - The first nationwide test to permit an appraisal of President Bush's signature education law rendered mixed results on Wednesday, with even some supporters of the law expressing disappointment.

Math scores were up slightly but eighth-grade reading showed a decline, and there was only modest progress toward closing the achievement gap between white and minority students, which is one of the Bush administration's primary goals. In many categories, the results indicated, the gap remains as wide as it was in the early 1990's.

By some measures, students were making greater gains before the law was put into effect.

"The absence of really bad news isn't the same as good news, and if you're concerned about education and closing achievement gaps, there's simply not enough good news in these national results," said Ross Wiener, policy director of the Education Trust, a group that seeks to bring attention to the needs of poor and minority students and has consistently supported the federal law.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, a comprehensive reading and math examination given to hundreds of thousands of students periodically since 1990, including in 2003 and last spring, was the first nationwide exam to allow a direct comparison between two successive test administrations since Mr. Bush signed the law in January 2002.

Mr. Bush, meeting with Education Secretary Margaret Spellings at the White House, said he was pleased with the test. "It shows there's an achievement gap in America that is closing," Mr. Bush said.

In an interview, Ms. Spellings called attention to the improvement in math by fourth graders. She said the less robust increases and outright declines in some reading scores were understandable in part, because the nation's schools are assimilating huge numbers of immigrants.

"We have more non-native speakers, there are lots of so-called at-risk, hard-to-educate students, and in spite of that, steady progress is being made," she said. "We're on the right track with No Child Left Behind."

Department of Education officials administered the test to 660,000 students in the 50 states and the District of Columbia, and on military bases around the world from January to March. It uses a 500-point scale, with scores assigned to achievement levels: below basic; basic, which denotes partial mastery of grade-level knowledge and skills; proficient, which represents solid performance and competency, and advanced, signifying superior performance.

This year's fourth-grade reading scores were almost flat, with the average score rising one point, but with 31 percent of students scoring proficient this year, the same percentage as in 2003. The decline in eighth-grade reading came as 31 percent of students scored as proficient, compared with 32 percent in 2003.

Fourth-grade students improved in math, with 36 percent scoring proficient, compared with 32 percent in 2003. Among the fourth-grade math scores there was another important gain, with the proportion of black students performing below basic declining to 40 percent from 46 percent.

Eighth-grade math scores also rose, with 30 percent of students proficient in math this year, compared with 29 percent in 2003.

But even the math improvements at both grade levels compared unfavorably with progress made from 2000 to 2003, said Jack Jennings, president of the Center on Education Policy, a nonprofit group that has mixed criticism of the law with praise for its accomplishments.

From 2000 to 2003, before the federal law took full effect in classrooms, the percentage of fourth graders scoring proficient in math rose eight percentage points, compared with four points this year, Mr. Jennings said, and the percentage of eighth graders proficient in math rose three points before the law, compared with the one-point rise this year.

"The rate of improvement was faster before the law," Mr. Jennings said. "There's a question as to whether No Child is slowing down our progress nationwide."

Gage Kingsbury, director of research at the Northwest Educational Evaluation Association, a nonprofit group based in Oregon that carries out testing in 1,500 school districts, said the results raised new concerns about the feasibility of reaching the law's goal of full proficiency for all students by 2014.

Fourth-grade math students showed some of the most rapid progress in closing the achievement gap between black and white students, Mr. Kingsbury said. Extrapolating from those results, he said, black and white students would probably be performing at equal proficiency levels by 2034. Other results, like eighth-grade reading, suggest it will take 200 years or more for the gap to close, he said.

"The change is moving too slowly," Mr. Kingsbury said.

When results of a smaller, long-term trend version of the National Assessment were released in July, Darvin M. Winick, the chairman of the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees the test, warned against attributing the solid gains it showed among

elementary students to No Child Left Behind. Mr. Winick pointed out that when that test was administered in late 2003 and early 2004, the law had been in effect for only about a year.

Administration officials, however, credited the law for the positive results, even though a proliferation of early childhood and kindergarten programs and efforts by states to impose curriculum standards, increase testing and reduce class sizes, begun during the Clinton administration, may have contributed.

The test results pointed to some clear standouts. Massachusetts students outperformed those of every other state in both reading and math at the two levels tested. District of Columbia students scored lowest, by far, in both subjects at both grade levels. California, where tax-cutting initiatives have driven down per-pupil spending and schools are crowded with immigrants, registered the nation's second-lowest reading scores.

Calculations made by New York officials showed the state's black and Hispanic students had made gains exceeding national averages.

But New York was also among a group of states singled out for criticism on Wednesday by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, a group that supports charter schools.

Foundation analysts used the federal test scores to evaluate assertions by many states that their students had made impressive gains from 2003 to 2005. States set proficiency levels for their own tests at widely varying levels.

Comparing the scores released Wednesday with previously released state scores, the foundation found that the gains trumpeted by more than 15 states were not confirmed by the federal results.

In New York, the percentage of students scoring proficient in eighth grade reading on the state's own tests rose by three points from 2003 to 2005, while the percentage scoring proficient dropped two points during the same period on the federal tests, the Fordham study showed.

But New York was not among the worst offenders, the foundation said. They were Alabama, California, Idaho, Arizona, Maryland, Virginia and Kentucky, it said.