

## Delaware schools: Students' struggle with reading gets worse statewide

### Officials blame cutback in 'read aloud' accommodations

By NICHOLE DOBO and MIKE CHALMERS • The News Journal • July 16, 2010

A handful of Delaware's persistently low-achieving schools made great gains in this year's state assessment scores, but students statewide struggled in reading, continuing a downward trend in that subject area.

Delaware **Department of Education** officials said the decline in reading scores was caused in part by a change in the way some students were given the test. Fewer special-needs students were given an accommodation on the reading test this year, meaning they had to take the test the same way as their peers. The accommodation, called "read aloud," allowed educators to read printed text out loud to students taking the exam.

In 2009, 6,321 students had portions of the reading test read aloud to them. In 2010, 1,435 got that assistance during the test. State leaders asked districts to limit their use of this accommodation based on the advice of U.S. Department of Education officials, said Michael Stetter, the state Department of Education's **director** for curriculum and instruction and acting director of accountability.

"We suspected, and the federal government suspected, this was inflating some scores," Stetter told the State Board of Education Thursday.

State officials on Thursday released school and district scores for reading and mathematics tests that were taken in March.

The Delaware Student Testing Program reading and mathematics exams are used to measure academic progress as defined under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The results will be used to determine

which three schools will face bold education reform efforts promised in the state's \$119 million federal Race to the Top program.

Statewide, scores on reading tests slipped in all grades this year, with the biggest drop in sixth grade. The percentage of students passing the test went down about 6 percentage points. Reading scores have gone down since 2007. Math scores remained about the same as in 2009. For the past five years, the state's overall math results have increased slightly, with the percentage of students passing hovering in the high 70s for elementary students and the mid-50s for 10th-graders.

State test results are an important component in determining whether schools are making adequate progress under NCLB. Failure to do so can result in sanctions. Delaware education leaders will release that information in August.

### Changes affect scores

If the state would remove the scores of the students who didn't receive an accommodation that they had the prior year, the state would have seen a 1 percent to 4 percent increase in the reading scores, Stetter said.

Despite the changes, there were some districts and charter schools that made big gains on the test, Stetter said. Those include Laurel, Woodbridge and Cape Henlopen **school districts**, and charter schools such as EastSide, Family Foundations and K

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uumba Academy.

While there was some notable growth in Brandywine School District's secondary-school scores -- especially in eighth-grade reading -- district officials are concerned about achievement gaps in the district, with minority and special-needs students not faring as well as their peers, Superintendent Mark Holodick said. Teacher education programs and the use of a new statewide curriculum, called Common Core standards, will boost scores, he said. That's part of a plan in place to cut in half the test-score gap between low- and high-performing students by 2014, he said.

"We support that aggressive approach," Holodick said. "It's always been a priority of Brandywine."

Special-education teacher Abraham Jones said he was impressed by the gains he saw in his Keene Elementary students this year. Those students scored particularly well in reading, nearly matching the achievement levels of their regular-education peers at the Christina School District school. He attributes the success to intensive use of data to inform daily instruction.

The loss of reading accommodations was a concern, Jones said, but the school's teachers met each morning to go over education strategies. In his classroom, he tracked the number of words his students could read in a minute and provided a healthful snack the day of the exam.

"It's the teachers' role to meet each and every student no matter where they are," Jones said. "You have to cater to the needs of the students."

A summer reading program in Red Clay Consolidated School District -- which saw losses in reading scores -- could help increase test scores, said Carolyn Zogby, the district's director of curriculum and instruction. About 600 students in grades three through six are taking part in the voluntary program, which helps students get a head start on next year's lessons.

### Considering other factors

Appoquinimink School District Superintendent Tony Marchio said he's trying to determine if some of the test score losses in his district were caused by the

loss of the reading accommodation for special-education students. Overall, the district -- which remains one of the highest-scoring in the state -- slipped in math and reading in all grades but one. The district plans to focus on three areas in the coming year: elementary special education, emphasis on higher-achieving students and a better tracking system for students who are moving into the district.

"While [test scores] are important, it is one indicator," Marchio said. "There are a lot of other factors we consider."

This was the final year for the DSTP, a pen-and-paper test that measures student progress toward Delaware content standards with a mixture of multiple-choice, short-answer and extended-response questions. In prior years, the state also administered a writing test. That was axed last year as part of state budget cuts. In the coming school year, students will take these tests using a new, computerized system called the Delaware Comprehensive Assessment System.

Parent Lisa Cobb, who has two children in the Brandywine School District and two others in New Castle County technical schools, said she believes students will shine on the state's new computerized testing system.

"The kids were pretty excited about that," she said. "This is a nano-technology generation. The kids love being on the computer."

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The annual tests have extra importance this year because three of the persistently low-scoring schools will be selected to take part in education reform programs under Race to the Top, a new initiative that brings \$119 million in federal grant money to the state. The state plans to guide 10 low-performing schools through this reform program, called Partnership Zones, in the next four years.

Two of the schools listed among the lowest-achieving by the state saw significant increases in both math and reading. At Christina School District's Bancroft Elementary, the percentage of students passing the fifth-grade math exam went from 35 percent to 50 percent. The school also had huge jumps in other grades and subjects, such as third-grade math, which went from 21 percent to 42 percent of students passing the test.

Christina School Board Vice President Shirley Saffer attributed increases in the scores to principals and teachers who make a commitment to a building and stay there. It's encouraging to hear that some of the lower-performing schools showed such dramatic improvement, she said. "That's unbelievable."

It's not yet known if score jumps are enough to keep schools such as Bancroft out of an intensive restructuring. Schools will be selected by the state to be placed in Partnership Zones in August.

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Purchase this Photo  
Teacher Samantha Connell works with students (from left) Brian Coverdale, Amyr Brown and Robert Laws in a fourth-grade reading and writing class at Kuumba Academy charter school in Wilmington on Thursday. (The News Journal/ROBERT CRAIG)

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Kindergarten teacher John Vitsorek reads a book and asks questions to gauge his pupils' comprehension Thursday at Kuumba Academy charter school in downtown Wilmington. (The News Journal/ROBERT CRAIG)

ONLINE DATABASE: Delaware Student Testing Program scores

**STATEWIDE RESULTS**

The Delaware Department of Education released school and district test results for the Delaware Student Testing Program for reading and math exams taken by about 83,000 public school students in March. Percentage of students meeting the standards in 2010 and 2009:

**READING**

**Grade 3**

2009: 81  
2010: 77

**Grade 5**

2009: 85  
2010: 81

**Grade 8**

2009: 81  
2010: 78

**Grade 10**

2009: 71  
2010: 65

**MATHEMATICS**

**Grade 3**

2009: 79  
2010: 78

**Grade 5**

2009: 77  
2010: 76

**Grade 8**

2009: 66  
2010: 68

**Grade 10**

2009: 56  
2010: 57

**On the Web**

Delaware Department of Education

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**Mom Dilemma #36:**  
Your daughter insists on wearing her princess costume to the grocery store. Allow it or not?

**YES, at least she's dressed!**

**NO, I have some rules!**

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