

State math and ELA test scores inch up in city schools

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Test results in English and math inched up for Rochester City School District students in grades 3-8, according to data released by the state Thursday, the latest incremental good news for the district.

About 13% of students in RCSD were judged to be proficient in both categories, a gain of a few points from 2018.

Both marks are still the lowest among the state's Big Five urban districts, though Rochester is nearing

Syracuse in both regards.

Statewide nearly 47% of students scored at a "proficient" level on last spring's math tests for grades 3-8, an improvement from last year, while the

percentage of students hitting the proficiency mark on English exams, 45.4%, was virtually unchanged.

State education officials released the results Thursday and said the traditional achievement gaps between white students and students of color closed slightly in several areas.

For instance, 35.3% of black students reached proficiency on the English, known as the ELA tests — 15.9% less than for white students. The gap was 17.3% last year and 21.9% in 2015.

The gap between white students and Hispanic students on ELA tests has closed from 20.7% in 2015 to 15.5% this year, the state Education Department said.

"The Board of Regents and I are committed to ensuring that all children, regardless of where they go to school, have access to equitable opportunities and a high-quality education," Betty Rosa, chancellor of the state Board of Regents, said in a statement.

More local results

Looking solely at fourth-grade results, Pittsford was the highest-achieving school for ELA, with 75% proficiency, while Honeoye Falls-Lima narrowly beat Pittsford out for the best in math, at 79% proficiency.

In the city of Rochester, the three topperforming schools were charter schools, with Rochester Prep and

schools, grades and students that need additional support, but that the state is striving to develop additional ways to measure student success.

What the numbers show

Of the Big 5 city school districts, New York City continued to have the highest percentage of students proficient in both ELA and math.

Yonkers was second in each, with 31.5% proficient in English, up nearly 5 percentage points from last year, and 34.6% in math, up 5 points.

The 3-8 tests are supposed to demonstrate students' "proficiency" in math and ELA, using complex scoring scales developed by test-makers. For each test, students are scored on a 1-4 basis.

A 3 is supposed to indicate that a student is proficient at meeting standards for the grade, and a 4 represents high proficiency. A 2 is supposed to indicate partial proficiency and 1 that a student is performing well below proficiency.

The 3-8 tests have been under scrutiny for much the decade, particularly when tougher tests were developed to reflect the Common Core learning standards and students' scores were used to help evaluate teachers.

Broad public opposition to "high stakes testing" quickly came to a head in 2014, with about 20 percent

Genesee Community Charter School leading the way. Schools 23, 52 and 3 were tops in RCSD.

Rochester recently received good news on its graduation rate, which is up to 58%. Its districtwide improvement plan was also substantially approved by the state Education Department, and it appears to have staved off a referendum on the question of removing the school board.

“While these results show a steady increase in the right direction, it is critical the district continues to place a strong emphasis on academic priorities, such as helping students to read on grade level by third grade,” Superintendent Terry Dade said in a statement.

“The district remains committed to delivering the high-quality instruction that every Rochester student deserves.”

Test results still draw scrutiny

Results were released for assessments given in April and May — less than two weeks before most schools will open for the 2019-20 school year.

Elia said that districts received local results on Tuesday and will distribute them to parents on their own schedules.

Educators and parents have long questioned the practical value of getting test results in late summer from the prior school year.

These were the final test results to be announced by Elia, who is stepping down at the end of the month.

She became commissioner in 2015, just after large numbers of parents starting having their children boycott the state tests over concerns about “high stakes testing” tied to the Common Core learning standards.

But Elia has been a strong supporter of the annual assessments, pushing school districts to sell parents on their value.

She said during a conference call with reporters that she sought statewide input on testing and has involved teachers in every aspect of creating the tests.

“We have virtually turned over development of our tests — questions, what should be on every test — to teachers,” she said.

Elia said the tests are important to help identify

of students statewide boycotting the tests for the next several years.

The state Board of Regents and legislators responded to the outcry by, over time, limiting how state test scores can be used to grade students and teachers.

The percentage of students “opting out” from taking the tests is continuing to decline as the public furor over state education policy, so strong several years ago, has died down considerably.

Sixteen percent of students opted out from the 2019 tests. Last year, 18% of students opted out, compared to 19% the year before and 21% the year before that.

Changes to the tests have made it difficult to compare results over time.

In 2016, tests were rolled out with fewer questions than the year before and, for the first time, students were given unlimited time to complete their exams.

Last year, the math and ELA tests were each reduced from three days to two days.

After the significant changes, state officials warned against comparing year-to-year results.

Under Elia’s leadership, the state has been developing new 3-8 tests tied to the state’s slightly revised learning standards that were adopted in 2017.

Those tests, representing the latest wrinkle in the state’s ongoing revisions of the 3-8 tests, are scheduled to be rolled out in 2021.

Since the 2016-17 school year, schools have had the option to offer computerized versions of the tests or stick with the traditional paper-and-pencil tests.

State officials have pushed school districts to move toward computerized testing, despite technical problems in New York and across the country.

Elia said the state is committed to working out technical glitches and to continuing the transition to computerbased testing.

“I’ve talked to many superintendents about this and they want it,” she said.

She said the use of computer-based testing will eventually allow the use of “adaptive testing,” which adjusts the rigor of questions based on students’ previous answers.

