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Schools Make The Grade

By ALEXA AGUILAR - aguilar@nwnewsgroup.com

Almost all McHenry County schools beat the state average on state tests, and many posted double-digit increases over their past performances, according to results that finally were released this week after a five-month delay. Statewide, 77 percent of elementary students met or exceeded state standards on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test, or ISAT.

Nearly all local elementary schools met or exceeded the state average for above-standard performances on the test.

In Harvard District 50, for example, 43.9 percent of eighth-graders met or exceeded state standards in math in the 2004-05 school year.

On the 2005-06 test, that number had jumped to 83.9 percent.

"It's exciting," said Deb Holland, the assessment coordinator for Harvard District 50. "It validates what we've been doing."

Local school officials say the gains are a result of more specialized instruction, constant assessment to see how students are progressing, aligning instruction with state standards and extra tutoring.

In Woodstock, 81.3 percent of students met state standards, up from a district average of 67.7 percent the year before.

"We are so pleased," said Cheryl Metcalf, assistant superintendent for teaching and learning.

The improvements could also be due in part to some of the many statewide changes made to the test in 2006, such as a new "kid-friendly" test booklet that included color and more graphics, new scoring thresholds and the addition of several more grade levels to the annual testing line-up. The change in format could have helped engage students, administrators said.

Regardless of the test's appearance, today's tests require a much higher level of thinking, said Sandra Thornhill, associate superintendent for Cary District 26. District 26's scores outscored the state average in every area.

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Schools Make The Grade — continued

“Certainly the knowledge and skills that students must have has increased,” she said. “They must have more knowledge and higher critical thinking skills.”

Denise Welter is principal at Landmark Elementary in McHenry, where 94 percent of students met or exceeded standards -- one of the highest-performing schools in the county. The students’ high scores are the “fruit of the labor” of students, teachers and parents, she said.

“Not that it’s the end-all be-all,” Welter said. “But it’s a nice affirmation.”

DELAYS IN TESTING

The schools didn’t have too much time to mull their success. As they sift through data that arrived five months late, they are also administering this year’s test to students this week.

“It’s almost been to the point of being overwhelming,” Thornhill said.

The district usually receives results in the fall, leaving enough time to make tweaks and changes to the curriculum if they discover that one grade level or subject area needs work.

But a series of problems at the state level led to the five-month delay, making Illinois the last state in the country to deliver test scores.

Matt Vanover, spokesman for the Illinois State Board of Education, said that a new testing company with a new way of tracking students, combined with reporting problems by local districts, caused the delay.

Local officials say they were left to rely on different tests this year as they tried to keep up with the ever-increasing demands of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. By 2014, the federal law requires that 100 percent of students meet or exceed standards. Every year, the bar students have to meet rises, until it eventually reaches that 100 percent mark in 2014. In 2006, 47.5 percent of students had to meet state standards.

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Schools Make The Grade — continued

SUBGROUPS

A complete list of which schools made “adequate yearly progress” under No Child Left Behind hadn’t been made available by the State Board on Monday.

Harvard fell far below the required 47.5 percent of students needed to make “adequate yearly progress,” with a math score of 5.9 percent, and a reading score of 23.5 percent.

That was the lowest scoring high school in the county. The state average was 54.3 percent.

But administrators said those low scores can be attributed to the scoring snafus at Harvard High last year, when the ACTs that students took were thrown out because of scoring mistakes. The ACT, a college-entrance exam, is a large part of the Prairie State Achievement Examination, the high-school test.

The annual “adequate yearly progress” list tells schools whether they’ve met the annual benchmark. If not, the school is placed in school improvement status, which can lead to sanctions.

Schools must meet the benchmark overall, and also within certain groups of students. If a school has 45 students or more who qualify as low-income, are part of a minority group, are non-English speakers or have disabilities, then those sub-groups must also meet the same benchmark.

Results were mixed in McHenry District 156, where students met state standards at McHenry High School East Campus but failed to make adequate yearly progress at West Campus because of the scores among students with disabilities.

Assistant Superintendent Gina Swinney said the group failed to meet state standards in reading and math. Improvement plans already were in place before the district received its results, Swinney said.

"We're working on it," she said.