

## More Triangle schools fall short

Fewer pass new math requirement

**Todd Silberman, Staff Writer**

Fewer North Carolina public schools met academic expectations, and fewer students earned passing scores last spring thanks to tougher state standards.

Test results released Wednesday showed that more than a third of the state's 2,353 public schools fell short of expected gains in student achievement in 2005-06. Only about one of every 10 schools achieved high marks for strong academic progress.

Triangle school districts mirrored the statewide trend, with all but Orange County showing a decline in the percentage of schools meeting state standards. Durham and Johnston counties saw the sharpest drops.

"We now know what the standards are," said Wake Superintendent Del Burns. "We'll continue to raise our performance. It's something we'll have to do."

The decline in school performance was expected. For the first time since the state began its accountability system in 1996-97, state education leaders demanded that schools show more year-to-year progress. At the same time,



Lynn Road Elementary teacher Bonnie Enfinger high-fives student Isael Uriostegui on Wednesday in math class. The school exceeded state standards and met federal requirements for academic performance.

*Staff Photo by Ethan Hyman*

students were expected to score higher on year-end math tests to reach grade level.

As a result, schools saw a dramatic drop in passing rates on math exams in third through eighth grades. While passing rates last year were close to 90 percent, this year's rates in elementary and middle schools were below 70 percent.

"When you raise standards, you're not going to see the same kind of success you have in the past," said Lou Fabrizio, director of accountability for the state Department of Public Instruction.

The higher math standard also widened an achievement gap between white and minority students that had narrowed in previous years since a large proportion of poor and minority students already were scoring near the minimal level for passing.

In Wake schools, 52 percent of black students in third through eighth grades met the tougher math standard in 2006, compared with 81.4 percent in 2005. In Durham, 43 percent of blacks passed in math last spring, compared with 77 percent the previous year.

Changes in passing rates among white students were less pronounced.

The new standards were made partly because state education leaders were under increasing pressure to toughen grading standards. In response, they made two key changes: One involved the higher scores required to meet the grade level standard in math. The second change required individual students to make greater progress from year to year for schools as a whole to meet their performance goals.

"We're trying to make our schools better," said Howard Lee, chairman of the State Board of Education. "That's why we're raising the bar."

So few schools met their overall goal that the bonus pay teachers can earn when their schools do well will drop this year to about \$70 million from nearly \$92 million last year. Teachers earn \$750 if their school meets its overall goal and \$1,500 if the school exceeds it.

## **Federal standards**

The tougher standard for math tests also means more schools fell short of federal standards under the No Child Left Behind law. In 2005-06, 45 percent of the state's schools met that standard, compared with 58 percent the year before.

Even in the high-scoring Chapel Hill-Carrboro system, the shift in standards left seven of 15 schools short of the adequate yearly progress required by the federal standards. Last year, five schools missed the mark.

Superintendent Neil Pedersen said he supports the tougher standards. But he also worries the results portray too bleak a picture of the system's progress.

"We're not at all pleased with where we stand," Pedersen said. "But it would be inaccurate to say performance is where it was 10 years ago."

Districtwide, 83 percent of students passed the end-of-grade math exams in Chapel Hill-Carrboro.

The higher standards hit black and Latino students the hardest. Only 46 percent of black students and 55 percent of Latino students passed the exams.

Only 30 percent of Johnston schools met the federal standard, down from 67 percent in the 2004-05 school year.

## **Subject to sanctions**

High-poverty schools that fall short two consecutive years in the same subject -- reading or math -- are subject to sanctions, including allowing students to transfer to other schools or enroll in private tutoring.

Selma Elementary, which has now missed in math for the past two years, will have to allow students the option of transferring to another school when the new semester begins in mid-January.

Powell Elementary, a magnet school in Raleigh, also will have to allow transfers to other Wake schools because it didn't meet the federal standard in math for two years

in a row.

"That's discouraging, but you have to move forward," said James Sposato, principal of Powell. "We're here to help the kids."

## Few high scores

Overall, fewer Wake schools ranked in a top-scoring category for meeting or exceeding state expectations and for having an overall passing rate of 90 percent or better. Eleven schools achieved that status in 2006, compared with 61 in 2005.

In Durham, 21 of 37 elementary and middle schools met state standards, but two other middle schools -- Chewning and Neal -- have been branded as low performing for falling short of growth expectations with a passing rate of below 50 percent.

David Sneed, Durham's assistant superintendent for research and accountability, attributed the drop at the two schools to the higher math bar. They probably would have escaped the low performing label otherwise, he said.

But the data released Wednesday show that scores from Chewning and Neal lag far behind the state and district average scores on the math exams, even under the new, tougher standards.

While about 62 percent of middle schoolers passed their state math exams for the 2005-06 school year, the average for Durham's students in grades six through eight was 49 percent. At Chewning, 37 percent of students passed the math standard, and 31 percent passed the math standard at Neal.

The numbers sank even lower for minority students.

(Staff writers Meiling Arounnarath, T. Keung Hui, Samiha Khanna, Marti Maguire and Patrick Winn contributed to this report)

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