

CMS shows big gains on N.C. tests; at-risk schools improve

Even some of the district's most at-risk schools showed major improvement.

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Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools saw 2009 test scores rise across the board, with some of the most troubled schools showing the biggest gains.

Districts across the state expect gains in elementary and middle schools, fueled by new state rules that required tens of thousands of kids who failed exams the first time to try again. Gaston County, which released preliminary results this week, also saw results soar.

But CMS saw a significant boost even before the retesting. And virtually every high school also saw test scores rise, with no second chances on those exams.

“This is really significant. I went through all the schools, and I was like, ‘Wow! Wow! Wow!’,” said Kathy Ridge, executive director of the nonprofit Mecklenburg Citizens for Public Education.

“Our teachers did a phenomenal job in these times of uncertainty,” Superintendent Peter Gorman said Wednesday.

Talks swirled during the spring, while students were preparing for exams, that CMS and other school systems would lay off teachers to deal with budget cuts caused by the recession. CMS layoff notices went out when the first round of tests ended.

“Staff members wondered, ‘Will I have a job with the system next year?’ Yet we stayed focused,” Gorman said.

Official scores for all N.C. schools are expected later this summer. Wake and most districts in the Charlotte region have not released results.

Gaston reported big strides, with science pass rates rising by more than 20 percentage points and reading and math rising by more than 10. But the district did not break out how much of the gain came from retesting, and has not released high-school results.

“The way that it was done this year is a much more accurate reflection of what our students are able to do,” Gaston Superintendent Reeves McGlohon said Wednesday.

Signs of success

For CMS, overall scores were higher in 22 of 23 areas tested; only 10th-grade writing showed a small slump.

Dramatic gains came at many of the lower-performing schools where Gorman changed principals and brought in proven teachers as part of his Strategic Staffing Initiative.

Sterling Elementary, for instance, saw reading pass rates rise from 35 percent to 48 percent and math from 52 percent to 76 percent, even before retesting. With the second-try scores, pass rates were 59 percent for reading and 84 percent for math.

Principal Nancy Guzman, who transferred from Pinewood Elementary this year, said Sterling's teachers zeroed in on weak skills, such as third-graders who couldn't read fast enough and fifth-graders who couldn't subtract with zeroes.

Ridge, whose group supports CMS efforts to recruit and train strong principals, said results at those schools provide "clear validation of the importance of changing out these school leaders."

CMS also saw strong gains at some of its struggling "Achievement Zone" schools, although others remain among the district's lowest performers. And high schools whose dismal performance garnered scathing criticism from Wake County District Court Judge Howard Manning just a few years ago have also risen: West Mecklenburg reported a pass rate of 73 percent and West Charlotte 68 percent.

"I'm looking forward to sending this presentation to Judge Manning," Gorman said.

Troubling gaps

But while Gorman celebrated the results, he cautioned that the achievement gap – a difference in scores between whites and minority students, and between low-income and other students – remains a problem.

While all groups made at least one year's academic growth, he said, in some cases the students who started out stronger made bigger gains.

For example, while 80 percent of white students scored at or above grade level on science tests given in fifth and eighth grade, only 34 percent of African American students hit that mark.

Gorman said his staff believes some African American students from low-income families do not arrive at school with the same experiences – visits to museums, for example – that whites from more affluent families enjoy.

Gorman said budget cuts and the resulting layoffs will make it difficult for CMS to post such improvements again next year.

“I can't see any way that the reductions we made won't impact our students,” Gorman said.

“But we have to make it work. We have to work harder and faster. It is going to be a difficult year.”

Another painful twist: The budget crunch means teachers and principals aren't likely to get the state and local bonuses that such success normally brings.

“We would probably have more people eligible for bonuses this year than ever,” Gorman said.

Value of retests?

For the first time this year, the state required tens of thousands of students who failed their exams the first time to try again – and allowed schools to count students who passed the second time toward their overall performance.

In CMS, about 14,000 students who failed reading, 13,000 who failed math and 5,000 who failed science were required to take the retest. Thousands more who scored “well below grade level” on those tests could retake them if their parents requested it; all told, CMS gave just over 48,800 retests.

Michael Evans, spokesman for Wake County Schools, said the retesting requirement for elementary and middle schools is expected to bump up pass rates statewide.

But he said Wake officials aren't sure it's worth the staff time and expense. “Plus you're putting kids who aren't academically successful under additional stress,” he said.

Gorman, too, said he's “not a huge fan of the retest process.”

He said a national test would relieve the questions that arise every time North Carolina and other states tinker with their systems, and provide a more meaningful gauge of success.