

Little change in county's school test scores

Local and state figures continue to lag behind pre-COVID outcomes

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Once again, public school students' standardized test scores across San Diego County and California barely budged from last year and still haven't regained the ground lost from pre-COVID days, new data released by the state Thursday shows.

About 52% of San Diego County public school students who took state standardized tests last spring passed them in English, and about 41% did so in math — meaning they scored high enough to qualify as having met or exceeded state standards in those subjects. That's an improvement of less than half a percentage point in math and virtually no change for English.

Statewide, 47% of students passed English and 36% did so in math. That's an improvement of almost 1 percentage point in math and less than half a percentage point in English.

In San Diego Unified, the state's second-largest school district, students did better than the state and county averages, with 54% of students passing English and 44% passing math. That's an improvement of three-quarters of a percentage point in math and half a percentage point in English from last year.

Every spring, California public school students in grades 3 through 8 and 11 take state standardized tests in at least English language arts and math under the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, commonly known as CAASPP. Private school students do not take the tests.

CAASPP scores are the only consistent indicator of student academic performance that can be compared across all of California's public schools and over time.

But some educators say there are limitations to using these test scores to judge or improve schools' and students' academic performance.

For one thing, test scores come out months after students took the tests and have moved on to the next grade, so the results come too late for teachers to use them to improve instruction for the students who took them.

Standardized test scores also tend to correlate heavily with students' socioeconomic status. The highest-performing schools, as measured solely by test scores, tend to have high percentages of students who are not from low-income families, while the lowest-performing schools often disproportionately enroll more low-income students.

That's because students from higher-income families are more likely to have resources and benefits, such as parents who can help them with schoolwork, while students from low-income families are more likely to lack such resources and to have experienced traumas, such as hunger or homelessness.

In most of the 10 San Diego County school districts with the highest percentages of students passing English and math tests, more than four out of five students were from higher-income families.

This year's test scores continue to show that specific student groups are struggling and lagging far behind their peers overall. In San Diego County, only 21% of students with disabilities met state standards in English, and 16% did so in math; the same is true for homeless students. And 10% of students learning English as a second language met state standards in English and math.

Fallbrook Union Elementary — a district of 5,100 in North County that includes Camp Pendleton, and where three-quarters of students are from low-income families — was the only district in the county to post significant gains in both English and math from last year.

About 53% of the district's students met or exceeded state standards in English, and 42% did so in math. Those represent improvements of 5 and 6 percentage points over last year, respectively.

The gains were even higher for low-income students: About 41% passed English, and 29% passed math, up 7 and 8 percentage points, respectively, from last year.

Superintendent Monika Hazel, who joined the district last year, credits those gains to several strategies.

For one thing, the district has teachers collaborate and meet regularly to plan lessons together, then share feedback about how well certain students were able to learn, Hazel said in an interview. Those meetings are "about getting to know every single student by strength and by need," she said.

Every school in the district has its own intervention teacher who works with students who need help catching up, Hazel said. Last year, Fallbrook had six district educators who specifically helped schools improve math instruction, such as by modeling lessons for teachers.

The district also dedicates staff to taking care of students' non-academic needs by having a full-time counselor, social worker and community liaison at every school, Hazel said. The community liaisons help students' families get their basic needs met, such as finding housing or food.

"The data is great — but every data point is a child, and so we really focus on the whole child. We don't focus on just academics," Hazel said.

Hazel said her district has received money from other sources, such as \$7 million in federal impact aid to offset Camp Pendleton's impact on property taxes, as well as about \$500,000 in state community schools funding for each of four schools over five years. Those funds allow the district to keep its school counselors, intervention teachers and other positions despite the expiration of pandemic aid, Hazel said.

At San Diego Unified, school board President Shana Hazan said she thinks the district's scores have stayed flat in recent years largely because the district had not had clear goals and plans to "meaningfully and measurably" improve student outcomes.

The board and district have worked for more than a year on designing those new goals and plans, which were approved at a board meeting last month. The district's approach now is centered around focusing on "spotlight students," or students who have been identified by each school as being significantly behind their peers in academics.

The district has recently adopted new literacy and math curricula and expects achievement scores to improve more noticeably after teachers get used to them and collaborate further on instruction, said Wendy Ranck-Buhr, the district's senior executive director of equity, access and opportunity.

The district also has a new data department meant to help identify ways to improve instruction and track how spotlight students are doing.

"We're on the right track for sure," Ranck-Buhr said.

Later this year, the state education department is expected to release its California School Dashboard ratings, which are a more comprehensive but also more complex assessment of school performance in test scores and other areas such as student absenteeism and college and career preparedness.