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WCSD students lag in math, English

Fewer than half showed proficiency in state test

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Reno Gazette-Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Fewer than half of Washoe County's third- through eighth-grade students are proficient in both math and English, according to test results released from the Nevada Department of Education.

Results were based on the Smart Balance Assessment that's administered yearly to students until high school.

"Certainly we want to get better," said WCSD's chief accountability officer Ben Hayes.

Forty percent of students in grades 3-8 were proficient in math in 2017, up one percentage point from 2016. Forty-nine percent were proficient in English, down from 51 percent in 2016.

This year's results show little change from 2016, when low scores prompted the district to implement new curriculum and update textbooks in an effort to bolster proficiency.

Those efforts weren't apparent in this year's results, but Hayes said parents can expect to see growth by next year. Hayes expects scores in math and English to grow next year.

"We're never satisfied with being statistically flat," Hayes said. "And certainly we want to see scores get higher and higher."

No data was collected this year for high school stu-

dents due to the state's transition to new end-of-course exams, according to state education department spokesman Greg Bortolin.

Nevada seniors are already taking the end-of-course exams, but the program is in a test phase until full implementation with the class of 2019.

ACT scores released in June, which measure college preparedness of high school students rather than proficiency, showed the third consecutive year of decline for the school district.

The district's ACT scores fell from 18 to 17.9 in 2017, slightly higher than Nevada's average of 17.4.

The district's stagnant growth in proficiency matches that of Nevada as a whole, but the district scored a few percentage points higher on average than the state. Forty-seven percent of Nevada's third-through eighth-graders were proficient in English this year, with 35 percent proficient in math.

According to Peter Zutz, the state education department's administrator of assessment, data and accountability management, a factor that could have played into the state's flat numbers was the increase in students enrolling in Nevada schools.

Roughly 20,000 more students took the Smarter Balance Assessment in 2017.

"That increase in students could have dragged us down," Zutz said.

New students can be at entirely different learning levels when they enter new public school systems, according to Zutz. That growth and difference in proficiency levels can sometimes affect testing results.

In contrast to the rest of Nevada, Washoe County's growth remained relatively unchanged last year, according to Hayes. Their flat test scores can't be attrib-

uted to new students.

Despite flat results, the state said one of the most significant ramifications from this year's data was just having data at all.

Nevada has been plagued by testing and assessment problems. As recently as 2015, the department of education nullified an entire year's worth of assessment data after software issues prevented all but a small amount of students to access the test at all.

Results from 2017 marked the second consecutive year of "successful assessment," according to Zutz. Meaning the district now has two data points with which to establish a sense of academic growth, critical to not only understanding how students are doing, but how the entire Nevada education system is performing.

When student assessment data was nullified in 2015, it also halted the state's school performance star rating system that measured effectiveness of schools state-wide.

A new star rating system was supposed to be released along with the Smart Balance data, but disagreements between the state and districts caused the department to delay the release of the new school ratings. The Nevada education department said preliminary star ratings will be assigned to schools in December.

Smart Balance data, including more detailed information on how specific schools and demographic groups performed, were made available to the public on the Nevada Report Card website on Friday.