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Updated 8/8: Test-score swings prompt review

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Illinois students performed so much better - or worse - on state tests this year that the State Board of Education has called for an independent review to help explain the fluctuations.

The swings in scores have bolstered criticism that a single test should not be relied on to measure students, evaluate teachers or penalize schools.

Scores on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test, taken in March by youngsters in third through eighth grades, showed sharper-than-normal increases or decreases, depending on the grade tested. The swings were most noteworthy in reading in third, fourth, sixth and eighth grades. In some cases, the change in the passing rates reached double-digit proportions.

"At this point, we're currently reviewing the ISAT scores. We hope to have the review completed and final scores available to schools as soon as possible," said Matt Vanover, spokesman for the State Board of Education.

Nothing unusual

Kevin Anderson, assistant superintendent for teaching and learning at Oak Park District 97, said the district is not seeing any unique jumps.

"We're not seeing any real problems," Anderson said. "We have a little fluctuation, but nothing like they're talking about."

Anderson said scores fluctuate a little each year because different groups of students are tested.

District 90 Curriculum Director Joanne Trahanas took a preliminary look at the scores and has not seen anything unusual.

Schools also are waiting to learn if they reached the 62.5 percent passing rate for all student groups. Under the federal No Child Left Behind law, schools that miss their targets for two consecutive years, even for a single subgroup, must offer school choice or after-school tutoring.

Statewide trends

State Superintendent Christopher Koch informed local districts earlier this summer that the swings "are not limited to a single district or set of districts; nor are they confined to a specific subgroup. Instead, we are seeing statewide trends."

The State Board of Education contracted with the Kansas-based Center for Educational Testing and Evaluation to investigate the reasons for the fluctuations. The state also asked its test contractor, Education, to review how it scored students' longer, written answers, and the weighting factors assigned to questions based on ease or difficulty.

"The fact that these issues were identified early in the scoring process shows that the safeguards we have in place are working to ensure the most accurate scores possible," said Koch, in a message to school districts in late July.

Suburban educators have been bracing for a downturn in passing rates for non-native speakers because those students were required to take the regular ISAT test this year with accommodations. The 2008 aberrations, however, were not limited to English Language Learners.

- Staff writer *Bridget Kennedy* contributed to this story.



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