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# North Coast school test scores rise

## STAR results show gains in math, language; statewide, 88% of seniors pass high school exit exam

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School test scores rose significantly across the North Coast last spring in both language arts and math, state school officials reported Monday.

Forty-seven percent of Sonoma County students scored proficient or better on the state STAR test in English language arts. That remains above the statewide proficiency score of 40 percent, and it represents a rise of 4 percentage points for the county over last year.

For Mendocino County, 36 percent of students were proficient in language arts. In Lake County, 35 percent were proficient. Both counties also saw their scores jump 4 percentage points from the 2004 results.

In math, the three counties also saw gains of 5 to 8 percentage points in the elementary grade scores from last year.

School officials attributed the gains to statewide efforts since 1997 to improve both textbooks and teaching.

"What I am especially happy about is we're making progress and the numbers are significant," said Santa Rosa Board of Education President Frank Pugh.

The district, the largest in Sonoma County, saw the number of proficient elementary students increase by 5 percentage points to 36 percent in language arts and by 8 points in math to 46 percent. It was a marked improvement after years of mixed results.

Monday was the annual release of school results under the state's STAR, or Standardized Testing and Reporting, program. More than 4.8 million students in grades two through 11 took the tests, used to measure student progress for state and federal accountability programs.

State officials also released the latest results of the state high school exit exam. This year's seniors are the first required to pass the exam to receive a diploma.

Eighty-eight percent of the seniors have passed the language arts and math sections of the exam, according to a state estimate. State law requires that students pass both sections to get a diploma.

Officials estimated more than 50,000 students have yet to pass the exam. Overall, they said, that may be about the same as the number of seniors who now don't meet graduation requirements anyway, usually because they lack all the mandated course credits.

But officials acknowledged some subgroups of seniors lag significantly behind their peers on the exam.

Statewide, only 75 percent of blacks have passed the math portion of the exam and 81 percent of Latinos have passed the math or the language arts sections. Only half of disabled students have passed the math section and only 65 percent of students with limited English skills have passed the language arts section.

Females outperformed males 91 percent to 86 percent in language arts and by one point in math, 88 to 87.

Figures for local districts and counties were unavailable.

The state Board of Education previously postponed making the exam's passage mandatory for the class of 2004. But it is likely the state will keep the exam as a graduation requirement for those graduating in 2006.

"All indications are that they are staying the course," said county schools chief Carl Wong.

The improvement in test scores was tempered by the possibility that schools with gains still may fall under federal sanctions. The state is scheduled to report Aug. 31 which schools made all their goals under the federal No Child Left Behind law.

"It's going to be tough because that bar's going up this year," said Jack O'Connell, the state's superintendent of public schools. For example, elementary schools must get at least 24.4 percent of all student subgroups to reach proficiency in language arts, up from 13.6 percent last year.

Nonetheless, officials noted Monday that scores for many grades have shown strong gains over time.

Fifty-two percent of Sonoma County ninth-graders scored proficient last spring, up 13 points in four years. In math, 60 percent of second-graders reached proficiency, up 14 points in three years.

In Santa Rosa, the portion of proficient fifth-graders in language arts rose 12 points in four years to 40 percent. Fifty-four percent of third-graders scored proficient in math, up 14 points in three years.

Educators said the results showed schools are on the right track to helping students, especially those who in the past have struggled academically.

"We have really gotten better at identifying those students who haven't succeeded and at finding ways to help them progress," said Santa Rosa Superintendent Sharon Liddell.