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Improvement on WASL carries asterisk

By **Linda Shaw**

Seattle Times staff reporter

Scores went up in all grades and subjects this year on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). But how much depends on how you look at them.

The official numbers, released yesterday, show strong gains, especially in seventh grade, which were larger than ever. The percentage of seventh-graders who passed reading was 60.4, up 12.5 percentage points from last year, and 46.3 percent in math, up 9.5 points.

"When you see that kind of academic gain, you have to celebrate it," state schools Superintendent Terry Bergeson said as she announced the scores. She told the audience to thank teachers "with a hug, and thank them with a pay raise."

But much of that increase in WASL scores can be attributed to the decision this year to lower some of the test's passing scores for the seventh- and fourth-grade tests. Without those changes, the seventh-grade gain instead would have been much smaller: 3.6 percentage points in reading, and 1.8 in math.

That's still an increase, but not nearly as rosy a picture. The same was true in fourth grade, where a gain of 7.7 percentage points in reading would have been less than one point if the changes had not been made, and 4.7 percentage points in math would have been two points.

In either view, the news was far from bad. Scores went up as they generally have every year since the WASL was introduced in 1987.



Terry Bergeson, state schools superintendent

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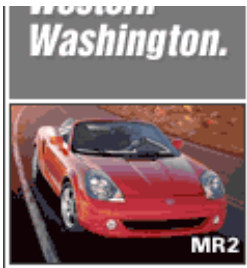
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Overall, however, the gains weren't big enough to douse concerns about what happens in four years when the WASL is scheduled to become a graduation requirement. Although 10th-grade scores improved across the board, only 38.8 percent of 10th-graders passed the three subjects they'll need to get a diploma — reading, writing and math. If that number doesn't go up, state leaders may be faced with a politically grim situation in which tens of thousands of students would fail to graduate because they failed the WASL.

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In fourth grade, 74 percent of students passed the reading test, 60 percent passed the math, and 56 percent passed writing. In 10th grade, the passing rates were 64 percent in reading, 44 percent in math and 65 percent in writing.

In science, given for the second year in the eighth and 10th grades, and for the first year in the fifth grade, the scores were lower: 28 percent passing in the fifth grade, 39 percent in grade eight and 32 percent in grade 10.

The number of schools that fell short of federal targets under the No Child Left Behind Act also went down this year, although that's also due largely to changes in the rules. The state negotiated some adjustments with the U.S. Department of Education that gave schools some breathing room. By 2014, however, all students must pass state reading and math tests.

With some appeals still pending, it looks as if 326 schools this year fell short of federal targets, which generally are based on WASL reading and math scores. That's down from 432 last year.

But the number of schools facing sanctions under the federal law may go up to 77 this year, compared with 44 last year.

Schools can miss the targets by a little or a lot. Of the 326 schools that fell short this year, 186 missed only one category, and often that was for special-education students, or those learning English.

Five Washington schools — including Seattle's Concord and T.T. Minor elementaries, and Madrona K-8 — made enough progress for the second year in a row to earn their way off the sanctions list.

But the improvements didn't satisfy critics who question the value and use of the WASL, a homegrown test meant to evaluate students' thinking skills as well as their knowledge.

Several candidates challenging Bergeson in her bid for a third term as state superintendent of public instruction have made the WASL a campaign issue, including Judith Billings, former state superintendent, and parent Juanita Doyon. Billings has said the WASL standards are too high, and that it should not be a graduation requirement at this time. Doyon would set aside the test.

Bergeson, however, says the WASL has helped give schools the impetus to improve. She says the state would be cheating students if it didn't outline the skills they'll need to get good jobs and be strong citizens in the future, and test them to ensure they're reaching them.

Charles Hasse, president of the Washington Education Association, said there's been too much emphasis on the tests, and too much accountability placed on students, and not enough on what the state needs to provide teachers and schools to get the job done.

"The notion that all we need are high standards and stringent tests is

absurd," he said. There's only so much that can be done, he added, "with no-cost and low-cost approaches."

As she announced the test results yesterday, Bergeson celebrated the gains, including the fact the achievement gap between white students, as a group, and most other minority groups narrowed nearly across the board. Hispanic students made the greatest gains — especially in reading. In fourth grade, their passing rate went up 12.6 percentage points compared with 6.8 for whites.

"For the first time, we have really good, solid evidence that the achievement gap is closing," she said.

As Bergeson campaigns for re-election, she says many people whine about the WASL, and she worries they're too complacent about what students will need to get good jobs in the future.

But she also stressed that schools and teachers can't continue to make gains without more help and money.

The gains so far have been made on the backs of teachers, she said.

"We can't have policy coming out of our mouth and not pony up," she said.

Bergeson said she plans to request a \$1 billion increase in education spending from the Legislature this biennium — less if Initiative 884 passes, which also seeks to raise more money for education with a sales-tax increase.

"If we're serious about our goals, we need to invest," she said.

Other highlights of this year's WASL results:

- The number of students who earn a score of 1 on the test (3 is passing; 4 is the highest) has declined sharply. In fourth-grade math, for example, 16.4 percent of students scored a 1 this year, compared with 47 percent in 1997.
- In the Kent School District, every ethnic group saw gains in reading and math at every grade level. Kent Elementary, with two-thirds of students on free or reduced-price lunch, saw its reading, writing and math scores jump.
- In Federal Way, at Harry S. Truman High School, an alternative school, pass rates on the reading test leaped from 29 percent to 72 percent.
- In Seattle, at all grade levels, several schools with large numbers of minority and low-income students showed double-digit gains, particularly in reading, even after accounting for lowering the passing scores: Rainier Beach and Sealth high schools; Graham Hill, Brighton and M.L. King elementary schools; and Madrona K-8 and the African American Academy.
- Seattle School District officials noted that African American Academy stayed on the federal "needs improvement" list because its unexcused-absence rate doubled, not because of its test scores, which improved. The district is examining whether the data submitted to the state were correct.
- Lynnwood High School showed some of the highest gains in the region with 45 percent of students meeting standards in math, a gain of 17 percent. Sixty-eight percent met standards in reading, a 15 percent gain over 2003. "Our teachers put a laserlike focus on reading and writing and it showed," said Lynnwood Principal Dave Golden.

- Other schools with big gains included Edmonds' Cedar Valley Community School, which went from 15 percent to 65 percent of its students passing the seventh-grade reading test, and Monroe's Frank Wagner Elementary, where there was a jump of 39 percentage points in students passing fourth-grade math.
- At Robinswood High School, an alternative school in Bellevue that has struggled with test scores for years, 40 percent of students met the reading standard, up from 22 percent in 1999. In 2000, not one student met the standard in writing. This year, nearly 39 percent did.
- Although fewer schools ended up on the federal "needs improvement" list, this year was the first year districts and the state faced the same possibility. Thirty-one districts, including Enumclaw, Highline, Lake Stevens, Marysville, Renton, Seattle and Stanwood, ended up in that category. Those districts still have time to appeal. If they stay on the list, the state is required to help them improve.
- Washington state also failed to meet federal targets for the second year in a row. Bergeson said the same was true of every state in the nation.

As usual, the schools that are the best and worst performers are often predictable, because test scores are highly correlated with students' family incomes. In general, the richer the families of a school's students, the higher the scores — a relationship that raises questions about how much schools can do to break that pattern.

And the gains don't make any educators forget how far schools need to go to meet state and federal goals.

"As we do make progress, we need to celebrate that, but not lose sight that we have a lot more work to do," Seattle Superintendent Raj Manhas said yesterday.

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Seattle Times reporters Sanjay Bhatt, Jolayne Houtz, Cara Solomon and Lynn Thompson and Seattle Times researcher Justin Mayo contributed to this report.

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