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Higher Student Test Scores Mean Progress? Council Wants Proof

By SUSAN SAULNY

Several New York City lawmakers cast doubt yesterday on the gains reported earlier this month on citywide reading and math tests, questioning whether they represented real advancements in student achievement.

At a hearing on testing and assessment, Councilwoman Eva S. Moskowitz, chairwoman of the Education Committee, clashed with witnesses from the City Education Department and the testing companies over whether enough information about the tests had been released to prove their legitimacy.

She and other council members also questioned the department's stated explanation of the increases: the recent reforms put in place by Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg.

This year marked the first time since 1991 that at least half the city's elementary and middle school students performed at or above grade level in both reading and mathematics. Overall, 54.8 percent of the city students met the literacy standards, up 14.4 percentage points from last year, and 50 percent met the math standards, up 7.5 percentage points.

"No one wants anything but good news for our kids," Ms. Moskowitz said, referring to test scores, "but I think it's very important that before we celebrate, we understand exactly what kind of phenomena we're talking about."

Two education officials and representatives from two testing companies hired by the city to write and score the tests stood by the results as reliable, testifying that the scores reflected better student performance.

Two other experts in the field of testing, Walter M. Haney, a professor at the Lynch School of Education at Boston College, and Robert Tobias, an education professor at New York University, suggested that there was not enough evidence to support that claim.

Asked whether he thought the higher scores meant schoolchildren were making academic gains, Dr. Tobias said, "I'd like to see more evidence before I render the opinion that students are learning more."

Similarly, Dr. Haney said, "We don't have enough evidence to rule out alternative explanations."

Dr. Haney and Dr. Tobias said alternatives might include factors like excessive focus on test preparation, changes in test content, scoring and scaling, and a change in the student population taking the tests. They noted, however, that they did not have enough information to say which - if any - of those factors made a difference in the citywide scores.

One of the education officials who testified, Lori Mei, the senior instructional manager in the division of assessment and accountability, said she wanted to dispel misconceptions that skeptics have raised.

She checked the tests, she said, and decided that they were not easier, and that the large gains were not the result of excluding more students who are learning English. "Improvement can be attributed to students' increased knowledge and skills," she said, "and are not the result of differences in how the tests are constructed."