

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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More South Carolina students pass high school exit exam on their first attempt

EDITOR'S NOTE: The South Carolina Department of Education has made a slight change in the way high school exit exam data are reported. An additional set of 2009 HSAP data tables on the agency's web site have been recalculated to allow accurate comparisons with 2010 data. Detailed information on this reporting change is available at the bottom of this news release.

COLUMBIA - Nearly four out of five South Carolina students passed the state's high school exit exam on their first attempt in 2010, according to results released today by the Education Department.

During their initial attempt last spring, 78.6 percent of 51,785 South Carolina high school students passed both sections of the state's exit exam by scoring at Level 2 or higher on the test's four achievement levels. That represented an improvement over 2009's passing rate of 76.4 percent.

State Superintendent of Education Jim Rex said the 2010 scores represented a bounce-back from High School Assessment Program numbers that dipped in 2009 after three straight years of improvement.

"We had been seeing positive scoring trends until last year, and then up popped this sudden downturn," Rex said. "But trends are what you watch for in student testing, and these new results appear to show that last year's downturn wasn't the start of a downward trend. We hope this year's results will start us back toward the sort of improvement we were used to seeing."

Rex said there was no doubt that drastic state funding cuts to public schools are hurting their ability to sustain improvements in student learning. South Carolina districts started the current school year with \$730 million less than they had two years ago, putting pressure on schools to maintain their core programs while eliminating 4,000-6,000 positions statewide. Rex estimated that between 2,900 and 3,800 of those positions were classroom teachers.

HSAP serves as both a state-mandated exit exam required for a South Carolina high school diploma and a federally mandated testing program to measure high school progress.

Public school students must pass both the English language arts and mathematics sections of HSAP to meet the state's exit examination requirement for a diploma. The tests are initially administered in the students' second year of high school, and students who don't pass both sections on their first attempts have additional opportunities to retake the tests they have not passed.

About half of the states require high school students to pass an exit exam, in addition to earning the state-mandated number of course credits, to earn a diploma. South Carolina also requires students to earn 24 high school credits to graduate; some states require as few as 14.

Statewide, 81.7 percent of second-year high school students who took HSAP for the first time last spring met the state standard of Level 2 or above in mathematics compared to 79.6 percent last year. In ELA, 85.9 percent met the state standard compared to 84.6 percent last year.

Achievement gaps between high-poverty and more affluent students shrank in both ELA and math. Gaps between white and African-American students shrank in math but stayed virtually the same in ELA. The gaps between white and Hispanic students decreased in ELA but increased in math.

Other HSAP highlights included:

English/Language Arts

- Free or reduced-price lunch - 78.6 percent met the state standard compared to 76.1 percent last year.
- African-Americans - 77.6 percent met the state standard compared to 76.4 percent last year.
- Hispanics - 79.0 percent met the state standard compared to 76.1 percent last year.
- Limited English proficient - 70.7 percent met the state standard compared to 67.0 percent last year.

Mathematics

- Free or reduced-price lunch - 73.6 percent met the state standard compared to 69.8 percent last year.
- African-Americans - 70.7 percent met the state standard compared to 67.6 percent last year.
- Hispanics - 77.7 percent met the state standard compared to 77.5 percent last year.
- Limited English proficient - 74.3 percent met the state standard compared to 72.2 percent last year.

In addition to functioning as the state-mandated high school exit exam, HSAP scores also factor into high school Adequate Yearly Progress ratings under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which requires that all students score at a level of Proficient or higher by 2014.

According to South Carolina's NCLB plan, Proficient is equivalent to a score at Level 3 on HSAP's four performance levels.

Statewide percentages at that level improved. In ELA, the percentage increased from 49.5 percent at Level 3 or higher in 2009 to 54.2 percent in 2010. In math, Level 3 scores increased from 50.3 percent in 2009 to

50.9 percent in 2010. Additional highlights from the 2010 HSAP results related to NCLB requirements included:

English/Language Arts

- Free or reduced-price lunch - 38.9 percent scored Level 3 or higher in 2010, up from 32.2 percent in 2009.
- African-Americans - 36.6 percent scored Level 3 or higher in 2010, up from 31.0 percent in 2009.
- Hispanics - 44.6 percent scored Level 3 or higher in 2010, up from 38.2 percent in 2009.
- Limited English proficient - 35.1 percent scored Level 3 or higher in 2010, up from 27.0 percent in 2009.

Mathematics

- Free or reduced-price lunch - 35.9 percent scored Level 3 or higher in 2010, up from 34.3 percent in 2009.

- African-Americans - 31.6 percent scored Level 3 or higher in 2010, up from 31.0 percent in 2009.
- Hispanics - 45.1 percent scored Level 3 or higher in 2010, up from 44.6 percent in 2009.
- Limited English proficient - 40.9 percent scored Level 3 or higher in 2010, up from 38.8 percent in 2009.

Rex said a number of statewide initiatives are under way to raise high school graduation rates. For example, Personal Pathways to Success helps students to make connections between the skills they learn in school and the skills they need to succeed in college and in their careers. In cooperation with parents and guidance counselors, each South Carolina high school student creates a personalized graduation plan centered on his or her goals. That plan includes selecting an academic focus - a “career cluster” - that will organize high school coursework around each student’s strengths and interests.

More than 6,300 students completed courses last year in the South Carolina Virtual School Program, which provides Advanced Placement courses in rural areas that don’t have enough students to support these classes. In addition, “credit recovery” programs help students who fall behind in their class work. If a student can’t keep up in a particular course, that student can catch up in a self-paced on-line program.

Stronger early childhood programs can help at-risk children get off to stronger starts in elementary school, Rex said, making it more likely that they will graduate on time.

Background on 2010 change in HSAP score reporting

When state and local-level Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS) scores are reported to the public on the South Carolina Department of Education’s website, the data reflect the performance of all children who took the tests. But for purposes of reporting Adequate Yearly Progress ratings under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, the calculations include only the PASS scores of students who were enrolled on both the 45th day of school and on the days when the tests were administered.

This practice isn’t unique to South Carolina, and the premise behind it is simple: NCLB holds schools accountable for educating only those students whom they’ve had sufficient opportunity to teach. Basically, the “45th-day rule” ensures that elementary and middle school AYP ratings are based on PASS scores of students who have been enrolled in those schools a significant number of days.

High school HSAP reporting for 2009 - for both AYP ratings and the annual HSAP score release - included only students enrolled on the 45th day of school and on the first day of testing. But for 2010 and in future years, annual HSAP reporting will be similar to PASS and will include scores for all students who are in their second year of high school, regardless of when they enrolled at a particular school. AYP reporting will not be affected by this change and will continue to use the 45th-day rule.

As a practical matter when analyzing scores, the data differences in HSAP reporting produced by this change are minor. When recalculating 2009 HSAP score reports to include all students, the difference statewide is only three-tenths of a point (76.1 percent passing both tests on the first attempt for HSAP reporting using the 45th-day rule, 76.4 percent passing both tests when not using the 45th-day rule and counting all scores).

To assist news media and the public in making apples-to-apples comparisons of 2009 and 2010 HSAP data, the Department of Education has added an additional set of 2009 HSAP tables on the agency’s

website that incorporate the revised calculation. For the most accurate comparison of data, use the 2010 and the revised 2009 tables.