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AIMS scores improve slightly, but test hurts graduation rate

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ARIZONA DAILY STAR

AIMS scores improved slightly across the state in 2007, education officials said Tuesday, but more students failed to graduate this year because of the test and more students needed extra classroom credit to get past the requirement.

The scores, which were released this week, are the final step toward graduation for most students, but for some, the test remains an impediment to moving on. Local educators received the results with mixed emotions; while they were enthusiastic about improvements, they also were unsure of what the scores really meant.

Statewide, the portion of students who passed Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards rose by a few percentage points compared with last year, Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne said. Between 2006 and 2007, average scores went from 68 percent to 70 percent in math, 68 percent to 69 percent in reading and 72 percent to 78 percent in writing, Horne said. He said the improvements were slim but important.

"Even slight increases are quite significant," Horne said, noting that scores have increased four years in a row.

Tucson-area school districts had minor changes for the most part.

In the Vail School District, students maintained or improved scores in elementary and middle schools, said Superintendent Calvin Baker, and high school students improved scores in all three categories.

Students at Sahuarita Unified School District also did well, Assistant Superintendent Manny Valenzuela said.

"The results were generally encouraging because our students exceeded state averages," he said.

In the Tucson Unified School District, Steve Holmes, assistant superintendent for teaching and learning, said students, overall, increased a few percentage points in reading and writing. Math scores did not change.

Five schools saw gains of more than 10 percent, including Lawrence Intermediate School, which was forced to restructure two years ago after failing to meet state standards. TUSD responded by hiring a new principal, Ana Gallegos, who in turn hired a new staff.

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(New data: 7/18/07)

By the Numbers

- 2007 Arizona high school graduates: 58,500
- 2007 Enrolled Arizona high school seniors: 82,000
- 2007 Arizona high school seniors who didn't pass AIMS: 525
- 2006 Arizona high school seniors who didn't pass AIMS: 332
- 2007 Arizona high school seniors who didn't pass AIMS but graduated through extra class work: 3,425
- 2006 Arizona high school seniors who didn't pass AIMS but graduated through extra class work: 2,855

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"She pretty much increased all her scores across the board," Holmes said of Gallegos.

He said the higher scores were important but TUSD needs to continue to improve, given federally enforced improvement measures and the threat of students' leaving for charter schools.

"We need to push for more accelerated growth," he said. "Small steps are good. Any movement up is good, but given where we're at with district corrective action and the charter schools, we need to show greater growth."

While the slightly better AIMS scores showed some student improvement, the number of students who didn't graduate because of AIMS increased by more than 60 percent from last year statewide, and the number of students who failed AIMS but were able to graduate with extra credit from schoolwork also grew substantially.

Since passing AIMS became a graduation requirement for Arizona high school seniors two years ago, grade augmentation was allowed. That meant students who didn't pass AIMS could do extra-credit work to supplement their AIMS scores and graduate. However, December graduates will be the last class allowed to do so.

State officials said 525 Arizona high school seniors weren't able to graduate because of AIMS. Last year, that group numbered 332.

Horne said the number of seniors who didn't graduate because of AIMS isn't surprising given the annual increase in the student population. He noted that 58,500 Arizona students graduated from high school this May. About 48,000 students graduated last year.

State education officials said only 38 students in Pima County were unable to graduate because of their AIMS scores.

Also, 3,425 Arizona seniors graduated after completing extra work to make up for poor AIMS scores. That number also grew, up from last year's total of 2,855 students.

In TUSD, 434 seniors graduated with augmented grades. In Vail, five seniors of the graduating class of 393 needed to do extra work.

"Obviously the students that are juniors this year will be the first class without the benefit of augmentation and schools will have to work especially hard with that," Horne said. "But the fact that students don't graduate in time doesn't mean they won't graduate."

He noted that seniors who don't pass AIMS during the school year can take the test again in July and continue to take it, at the state's expense, until they pass. "The bottom line is, we haven't given up on anyone," he said.

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