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English, reading emphasized

Other subjects get less time in early grades

BLOOMBERG NEWS

U.S. elementary-school teachers are spending more time teaching English and reading, and less time on other subjects, following the introduction of the No Child Left Behind law, federal researchers have discovered.

A survey of more than 5,800 first- through fourth-grade teachers by the U.S. Education Department found they spent an average of 11.6 hours per week on English and reading in the 2003-04 school year, up 6 percent from the 10.9 hours they reported in both 1999-2000 and 1993-94.

The statistics, compiled by the department for a report to be published next month, show declines in the 2003-04 survey for the amounts of time spent teaching math, social studies, history and science.

"Clearly the message about the importance of reading and language has gotten down to the early elementary schools, and they're devoting more time and energy to it," said Mark Schneider, head of the department's National Center for Education Statistics. "That is the one fact here that is incontrovertible."

The figures could provide ammunition for critics who have warned that the mandatory tests required by No Child Left Behind could deprive students of a more balanced education, said Michael Petrilli, vice president for policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, a research group.

"This raises some concerns about the narrowing of the curriculum," said Petrilli, a former Education Department official who helped the Bush administration implement the No Child Left Behind law.

Still, the statistics cover only the first four grades, Petrilli said. "If there was ever a time to focus primarily on reading, that would be it," he said. It would be more troubling if such trends continued in upper grades, when students should be using their reading skills to master other subjects, he said.

The No Child Left Behind law of 2002 requires schools to administer annual tests in reading and math in grades three through eight.

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