

All grades show gains in reading

Educators celebrate end-of-year test scores

By **DEBBIE CENZIPER**
Staff Writer

Declaring "our teachers delivered," Charlotte-Mecklenburg school leaders celebrated Tuesday with the release of year-end reading and math test scores that showed substantial across-the-board gains in grades three through eight.

Every grade saw increases this year in the percentage of students reading at or above their grade level. In the third grade — where Superintendent Eric Smith has promised to dramatically improve scores — the percentage of students reading on grade level climbed seven points, from 63 percent to 70 percent.

Every grade except third also posted improvements in math.

In the eighth grade, the percentage of students on grade level in math jumped from 60 percent to 68 percent, in the fourth grade from 69 percent to 75 percent.

"During the course of testing, I saw people kind of walking around ... really with a sense of pride. There was a lot of focus on instruc-

RESULTS BY SCHOOL

Find reading, math results on page 5C. Go to www.charlotte.com for fourth- and seventh-grade writing scores.

tion this year. It was in every detail," said Susan Purser, chief officer of instruction. "Our teachers delivered."

Though the results are preliminary, the scores give an early look at how elementary and middle schools could fare this summer on the statewide testing and accountability program known as the ABCs. Schools that perform poorly face penalties, such as the removal of their principals. Schools with top results are eligible for state bonuses.

In elementary and middle schools, the ABCs use the end-of-grade reading and math tests given in grades three through eight to determine a school's success. The ABCs also consider the scores of

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Educators celebrate gains made on end-of-year tests

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the end-of-grade writing test, given in grades four and seven.

The state looks at how schools perform in two ways: the number of students performing at their grade level and how much students grow academically during the course of a school year, as measured by end-of-grade tests.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg school leaders say that despite the gains in scores, there's still work to be done. In third grade, for example, 30 percent of students are still reading below grade level. In math, it's 36 percent. Smith has promised that by 2001, 85 percent of third-graders will be reading on grade level.

Still, encouraged by the test scores, Charlotte-Mecklenburg school leaders say they're anxious to see how the state rates local schools.

Besides the gains in reading and math, the percentage of seventh-graders writing on grade level rose this year from 51 percent to 66 percent. Fourth-grade scores stayed about the same.

Results of the ABCs will be released in late summer. Statewide results on the end-of-grade reading and math tests are not yet available, and there are no comparable test scores to compare school systems nationwide.

"We're a pretty modest group. We've been working on this thing all year long, and we're sort of still waiting to see what the state says," said Albert Winston, principal of Hidden Valley Elementary, which showed gains this year in math and reading at every grade level.

"We know that we worked real hard and the teachers worked real hard."

At Devonshire Elementary, educators decided not to wait for state results to celebrate.

"We did it! We did it!" they shouted when Principal Celia Brandon-Phelan shared the test score results. Some started jumping up and down. One started crying.

Last year, Devonshire was deemed a "low performing" school. This year, Devonshire showed gains at almost every grade level in reading, including a 30-point leap in third grade, from 37 percent to 67 percent of stu-

SCORES BY GRADE LEVELS

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The school system posted across-the-board gains. Here's the percentage of students performing at or above grade level in reading and math this year, compared to last year, and the change in percentage points. State results have not yet been released.

Reading

Grade	1997	1998	Chg.
3	63	70	+7
4	62	68	+6
5	66	71	+5
6	62	65	+3
7	63	65	+2
8	67	74	+7

Math

Grade	1997	1998	Chg.
3	65	64	-1
4	69	75	+6
5	68	73	+5
6	69	70	+1
7	65	70	+5
8	60	68	+8

Source: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

dents on grade level. The school posted gains in math, too.

Devonshire offered ice cream to students who worked hard in class this year and threw a pre-test pep rally. One teacher dressed up as Michael Jackson.

"It's been a somewhat stressful year," Brandon-Phelan said. "You think you're doing the right thing and you hope the results would show it. I feel super good. I feel like we pulled it together."

To help schools prepare for the tests, teachers across the system were given step-by-step guides breaking down the state's complex curriculum goals.

The guides included sample lesson plans and gave teachers specific questions to ask, along with vocabulary words and terms

to teach.

Teachers were given practice tests to assess the strengths and weaknesses of students. That way, they were able to review skills that posed the most trouble.

The school system also reduced class sizes in elementary schools with high numbers of poor students and gave each school an extra educator in charge of working on reading and writing goals.

A new literacy curriculum was introduced, stressing a mix of phonics and whole-language strategies.

In middle schools, changes include a newly required literacy class and a nationally touted college preparation program for average students.

"Our middle schools just shined," said Anne Udall, assistant superintendent of curriculum.

Some educators, though, are now worried about the performance of Charlotte-Mecklenburg high schools, which participate this year for the first time in the ABCs.

Almost every Charlotte-Mecklenburg high school suffered drops in the number of students mastering the end-of-course writing test, one of the key measures used to determine success on the ABCs at the high school level. Other end-of-course test results have not yet been released.

But even if the results aren't good, nine of 14 Charlotte-Mecklenburg high schools won't face state sanctions.

Seven of the nine were given exemptions because last year's boundary shifts, or other changes, dramatically changed student populations from the year before.

Two of the high schools, Vance and Butler, are new this year and would have been excluded anyway: They had no previous-year test scores to use in comparisons.

"The writing test hit people very hard," Udall said, "but what you say is, 'OK, how do we do better next year?'"

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