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City schools post big gains

Test scores improve in reading, math

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The Baltimore school system posted historic gains on the Maryland School Assessments this year, with reading scores up an average of 11 percentage points and math up an average of 8 points.

With the biggest improvement in fifth, sixth and seventh grades, the city bucked a national trend in which progress among young children stagnates or reverses by the time they enter middle school. Sixty-one percent of Baltimore's seventh-graders passed the reading test, compared with 43 percent last year, a jump of 18 percentage points.

"There is no way to overemphasize how extraordinary that is," said city schools chief Andres Alonso, who just finished his first year on the job. "This just is so incredible."

The system is at an all-time high at every grade level in both subjects, he said. Special education students, low-income students and students learning English as a second language improved more than the system as a whole. African-Americans progressed faster than their white peers.

Yesterday's results indicated that recent gains in elementary school scores have carried on - and in some cases, accelerated - as students reach middle school. For example, among the students who just finished seventh grade, 54 percent had passed the reading test as sixth-graders, and 61 percent passed this year.

The number of students scoring "advanced" - or above grade level - also increased substantially despite declining enrollment. In math, 3,274 fewer students failed the tests; 255 more students passed in the "proficient" category, indicating they're on grade level; and 1,671 more passed at the advanced level.

Officials had various theories about what caused Baltimore's rise in scores on the MSAs, standardized tests administered annually in grades three through eight and used to gauge a school's progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Some believe that the elementary school reform the city instituted several years ago is finally taking hold in the middle grades.

While Alonso has instituted a flurry of changes since arriving in Baltimore last summer, the



conventional wisdom says it takes a few years before changes translate into better test scores.

Alonso said the system was on a steady path of improvement before he arrived and that this year's scores reflect those gains as well as increased attendance and a lower truancy rate in the 2007-2008 academic year. Also this year, he directed principals to stop suspending students for nonviolent offenses without good reason, leading to a decline in the number of kids out of school.

At Morrell Park Elementary/Middle, Principal Sean Conley said his seventh-grade pass rate in reading improved from 25 percent to 70 percent; in math, the jump was from 12 percent passing to 68 percent. The first-year principal attributed the success to mentoring and professional development for his young teaching staff, individual plans to help struggling students and extensive efforts to create a more positive school culture, leading to better attendance. "There is never an excuse, never a reason for a teacher to say, 'I don't know how to teach' or 'I don't know what to teach,'" he said.

Overall, 68 percent of Baltimore's students passed their reading tests, up from 57 percent last year and 49 percent in 2004. In math, 56 percent passed this year, compared with 48 percent last year and 34 percent in 2004.

Alonso stressed that, despite the improvements, math performance in seventh and eighth grades is still unacceptably low. Only 28 percent of the city's eighth-graders passed their math test, up from 24 percent last year.

The city's performance contributed to a narrowing of achievement gaps statewide between white and minority students and middle-class and poor students. Seventy-six percent of city fifth-graders passed the reading test, the same percentage that passed statewide last year.

"There will come a time when we have a conversation about kids in Baltimore City and the question will not be about catching up," Alonso said. "The question will be, can we surpass? For that to happen, these kind of results need to become sustainable over time, across all kids in the system."

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