

Literacy a sticking point

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Literacy bedeviled public schools last year as students throughout the state struggled to excel at reading and writing, according to the latest standardized test results.

Pupils in third and sixth grades in Monmouth and Ocean counties did worse in 2008 than in 2007 in terms of being above average compared to similar districts in the state. For example, while 19 sixth grades in Ocean County did better than their peers in the advanced portion of the literacy test in 2007, just eight made the mark in 2008. There are 34 sixth grades in the county. Part of the reason for the decline may be tougher testing standards put in place last year for grades 5 through 8. The state required more correct answers for a pupil to be deemed "advanced proficient," the topmost tier of the grading system. "One year doesn't make a trend," said Richard Vespucci, spokesman for the state Department of Education. Language arts, or literacy, generally dropped among 11th grade students in the state, Vespucci said. But the state has not yet determined the cause, he said. Other details released in the 2008 New Jersey School Report Cards show: -?Costs are up. Per-pupil spending in most districts in Monmouth and Ocean counties exceeded the state average. It now costs between \$11,000 and \$13,000 a year to educate one student in New Jersey, depending on the district. -?Both counties' vocational school districts - magnets for the brightest students at the Shore - had among the highest SAT results in the state. -?Math results remained steady. Students in both counties and the tested grades - third through eighth and 11th - generally did as well in 2008 as they did in 2007.

Some excelled

Several districts bucked the literacy decline by remaining consistently above average in the reading and writing portion of the tests. To help readers understand the array of numbers, the Asbury Park Press focused on advanced proficient, or the top rank of each test. All the tests measured performance in language arts and math, and grouped students into three categories: partially proficient, proficient and advanced. If a school class did better than its peers in the state, it was given an "Above" average mark in the charts and on the Web. In the fourth grade, two of Hazlet's six elementary schools scored high in language arts, with Beers Street School and Sycamore Drive School scoring five times higher than the state average for schools with similar socioeconomic status. Superintendent William E. George III said the district has added three basic skills teachers in recent years to help students at the elementary level "close the gap." The district also uses hands-on, interactive activities and in-class "literacy centers" to create as much enthusiasm for language as possible. "We want to make sure kids are reading the material for its educational content, but at the same time, that it is something that really engages their interest," George said. The Keansburg district also produced high fourth-grade scores in language. Pupils at the Joseph C. Caruso School scored three times higher in advanced proficiency than their peers. Principal Elaine Feyereisen said group learning is often used. Tutoring before or after school is also offered to pupils who need extra help, she said. Math was the forte for fourth graders last year at Ocean Gate Elementary School. They scored twice as high as their peers, with 55 percent being deemed advanced proficient. "We're doing amazing things here with standardized test scores," Superintendent Frank Vanalesti said. "Ocean Gate has some of the poorest children but some of the highest test scores. We keep the children happy with small classes, more direct instruction, better-trained faculty, and a close-knit school district with every child counting."

Back to basics

Despite the overall decline in the 11th-grade language results, students at Point Pleasant Beach High School excelled in that portion of the test. "I can tell you this is fairly consistent with years past," Superintendent John Ravally said. Of the 95 students who took the test, 29.5

percent were advanced proficient - nearly three times higher than their peers. Ravally credits English II Skills, which was started about 10 years ago, with the success. "Most students take that as sophomores, and it is a skills-based course, not a literature-based course," he said.