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State: Online testing helped raise scores

From eSchool News staff and wire service reports

August 18, 2005

Oregon students of all ages showed across-the-board improvements on state tests in core subjects during the 2004-2005 academic year, according to figures released last week. State officials attribute the gains in part to the use of a home-grown, web-based testing service called Technology Enhanced Student Assessment (TESA).

"Our investment in TESA is paying off in both financial and academic terms," Oregon State Superintendent Susan Castillo said, adding that the system has helped make Oregon's teachers even more effective instructors. "Web-based testing is more secure and less expensive to deliver. Best of all, students and teachers get immediate results, and I hope to see 100 percent of our testing move online in the future."

Seventy-five percent of all Oregon students used TESA to take state-standards tests in the last year.

According to new data released in August by the Oregon Department of Education, the scores of Oregon third, fifth, eighth, and 10th graders on state tests in core subject areas rose significantly from the previous school year. In reading, students showed an overall average increase of 3.1 percent from 2004 to 2005; all grades increased 4.1 percent in math and 4.43 percent in science.

Oregon delivered almost one million tests last year through the state's computer-based testing system. TESA uses web-based exams to measure student achievement, and state officials say the system has many benefits over conventional paper-and-pencil tests.

TESA gives educators three opportunities to test their students throughout the school year. Scores are delivered automatically upon the test's completion, providing immediate feedback for the student and teacher. Often, teachers will space out the testing periods over a school year and use early test results to evaluate which material a student needs to focus on in

order to reach grade-level proficiency.

Doug Kosty, assistant superintendent for assessment and information services, said the cost of implementing the test electronically is about \$1.30 less per student, per exam, than the paper-based version.

"As more tests go to web, and fewer are delivered via paper and pencil, the savings will increase," Kosty said.

TESA web testing and other state resources are being devoted to core subjects such as English, math, and science. But these core curricula often are pushed at the expense of classes in the arts, music, or theater.

"What we are not assessing is what was lost," said Tony Alpert, a data analyst at the state Department of Education. "The school experience for kids is dramatically different than it was when I went to school. I didn't have classes with 40 kids, there were talented and gifted programs available, I was able to go to band and orchestra."

The data were released on the heels of another report, showing that about a third of the state's 1,200 public schools were not meeting federal standards laid out in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act, the signature education package of the Bush administration.

Under NCLB, schools are required to get increasing percentages of children achieving at grade level; those that receive federal funding and fail to make the required level of progress eventually will face sanctions.

The two sets of data present slightly different views on Oregon schools, because the federal law requires that schools break out the performance of various subgroups, such as blacks, Asians, Latinos, special-education students, and those that are learning to speak English. If even one of these subgroups doesn't reach testing goals, an entire school is found to be "in need of improvement."

By contrast, the state testing results consider a school's student population as a whole, without breaking out the various subgroups.

"We do need to make more progress with these subgroups," Alpert said. "But let's not ignore the progress we are making overall."

Assistant Superintendent for Assessment Kosty is optimistic that the program will continue to yield positive results, and he offered anecdotal evidence to suggest that web-based testing is raising student motivation.

"Because students receive their results immediately, when kids are really close to meeting the benchmark and know they are, they get real excited and actually motivated. I've heard stories where kids say, 'I'm just a point away from making it.' Three months later, they've got a goal in mind," Kosty said.

"We've heard these stories about kids screaming [with excitement] in computer labs when they discover they've made [the benchmark]. I think the motivation factor for kids is quite large."

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