



Tests Raise Questions About Longer School Day



Jose More
Chicago Public Schools chief education officer Noemi Donoso in her office Tuesday June 28, 2011.

by REBECCA VEVEA | Jun 30, 2011

Mayor Rahm Emanuel and new leaders of Chicago Public Schools have been pushing for a longer school day and year to raise student performance. But last week's state test results show that charter schools—which typically have more instructional time—actually have a lower percentage of students exceeding state standards.

Overall, state scores on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test were up in Chicago Public Schools. The percentage of students who exceeded state standards increased, but the number still remained low—16.6 percent, up from 14.7 percent last year. The percentage who met state standard increased to 73.9 percent, up from 68.5 percent.

A breakdown by school type shows students at selective-enrollment schools most exceeded state standards, followed in order by magnet schools, neighborhood schools, charter schools and turnaround schools, according to a Chicago News Cooperative analysis of the results. Turnaround schools are those that had been overhauled because they were previously identified as the district's lowest performers.

Both neighborhood and charter schools saw an increase in the number of students meeting state standards—6 and 4 percentage point increases, respectively. Jean-Claude Brizard, chief executive of CPS, said the district “can feel good that we're making positive strides with the meets number, but the real test is exceeds.” Both groups of schools posted a roughly 2 percent increase in students exceeding state standards, but the numbers still remained low.

In terms of exceeding state standards, selective enrollment schools fared the best, with 63.8 percent, magnet schools had 26.3 percent, neighborhood schools had 15.3 percent, charters had 13.8 percent and turnaround schools had 8.3 percent.

In terms of meeting state standards, selective enrollment schools still did the best, with 99.2 percent, magnet schools had 83 percent, charters with 75 percent, neighborhood schools had 72.8 percent and turnaround schools had 62.7 percent.

The low numbers for exceeding standards have been used to argue for a longer day and year, which CPS now has the power to implement. In his push for more classroom time, Emanuel has repeatedly—as recently as Monday night—cited the charter school model.

But the fact that charter schools and neighborhood schools performed nearly the same, despite the charters' additional classroom time, suggests that the impact of more time is unclear.

On Tuesday, Noemi Donoso, the new CPS chief education officer, said, “Just extending a school day doesn't mean, by itself, that you're going to have high performing schools. It's not going to be simple.”

Although turnaround schools have the lowest average scores, those run by the Academy of Urban School Leadership showed the most significant gains from last year—a 9.5 percent increase from last year in percentage of students meeting state standards. A.U.S.L. will get an additional \$6.4 million from CPS in the next school year to expand its teacher training services at two more elementary schools—Morton and Howe.

In the past several years, parents, teachers and experts have grown concerned that an emphasis on testing in CPS—at times students are taking a standardized test every five weeks—has limited learning, which in turn affects performance on standardized tests. Barbara Radner, director of the Center for Urban Education, works with struggling schools in Chicago and said the scores on the state test could have been higher if teachers were given more time to teach rather than prepare for tests.

“There’s a difference between assess and test,” Radner said. “We need a better day. If it’s longer and it’s more of the same, it’s not going to make a difference.”

Elaine Allensworth, director of the Consortium on Chicago School Research, echoed Radner’s concerns about testing. “The more you spend time on test prep, the less you actually learn. A lot of schools will spend a quarter of instructional time just preparing for tests.”

Donoso said the fundamental concept of testing can put schools in a difficult position when it comes to planning curriculum and schedules.

“I think it’s hard because that’s kind of the way testing works,” Donoso said. “It drives the behavior at schools and in the classrooms. So the challenge is to make sure that we have assessments that are aligned with the vision of the curriculum we want in the classrooms.”

In 2014, the state test will switch to a new, more rigorous exam that will align with the Common Core, a set of curriculum standards adopted by states across the country to better prepare students for college.

Donoso, who is replacing Charles Payne, the interim chief education officer, is responsible for developing the district’s curriculum strategy and working with school leaders to carry it out. Her main focus in the coming years will be implementing the Common Core curriculum, which is designed to develop analytical skills beyond those currently tested on the ISAT.

Radner said CPS “needs to step it up” or scores are going to crash when the new test is given in 2014, calling the change “the biggest shift I’ve ever seen.”

“We can’t be complacent,” she said “This is a whole different generation of standards and assessment.”

Breaking Down The Test Results

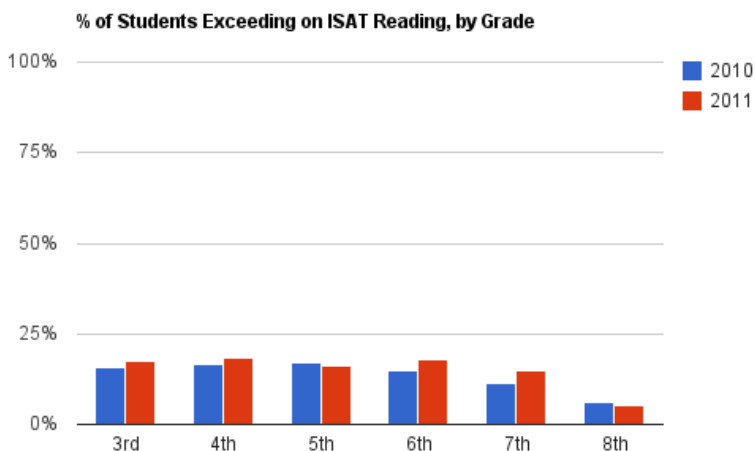
An analysis of school-based data on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test showed strong gains at turnaround schools, increases at every grade level and widening achievement gaps. A jump in scores overall in 2006 can be attributed to a reformatting of the ISAT assessment and a resetting of the cutoff for meeting and exceeding standards.

A breakdown of results by school type shows that although CPS schools are performing better overall, the percentage of students exceeding state standards remains small. District officials and education experts say students who exceed state standards at the elementary level are more likely to graduate high school and go on to college. The “exceeds” metric was used by CPS leaders to push for a longer school day and year.

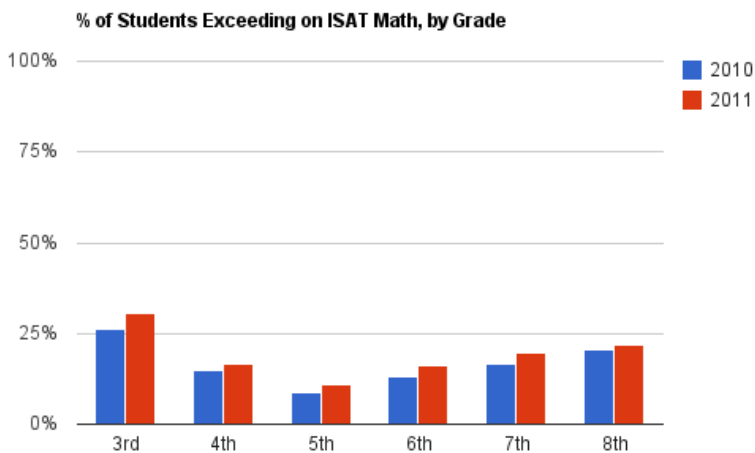
A breakdown of students exceeding standards by school type over the last ten years shows that selective enrollment schools, which require an entrance exam, perform best. Magnet schools, which draw students from across the city and offer special curricula and programming not available at traditional schools, are consistently high performing. Neighborhood schools, which take students from the immediate geographical area and typically do not have special programming or extra supports, have shown a steady increase, but low overall results. Charter schools, which enroll students based on a lottery and usually receive some level of private money to operate, perform about the same as neighborhood schools. Finally, turnaround schools, which are schools that have been overhauled because they were previously identified as the district's lowest performers, performed the lowest but made the largest gains in the last year.

There is a large disparity in the performances of white students and their African-American and Hispanic counterparts in CPS schools. Though scores for African-American students and Hispanic students have steadily increased, a higher percentage of white students exceed state standards—a strong indicator of success in high school and beyond – and have showed larger gains in the last two years.

An analysis of state scores by grade shows an increase from 2010 across all grades. Third grade had the highest percentage of students exceeding standards, while eighth grade had the highest number of students meeting state standards.



The low percentage of students exceeding state standards in reading, especially at the eighth grade level where they declined to 5 percent, is cause for concern among district officials. Last week, preliminary scores for the eighth grade EXPLORE test, which is a better assessment of college readiness, showed that only 30 percent of eighth grade students hit targets.



In math, CPS third graders posted the most impressive scores with 30 percent of students exceeding standards. Fifth grade students were the lowest, with 11 percent exceeding standards.

-Charts by Juan-Pablo Velez, text by Rebecca Vevea

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