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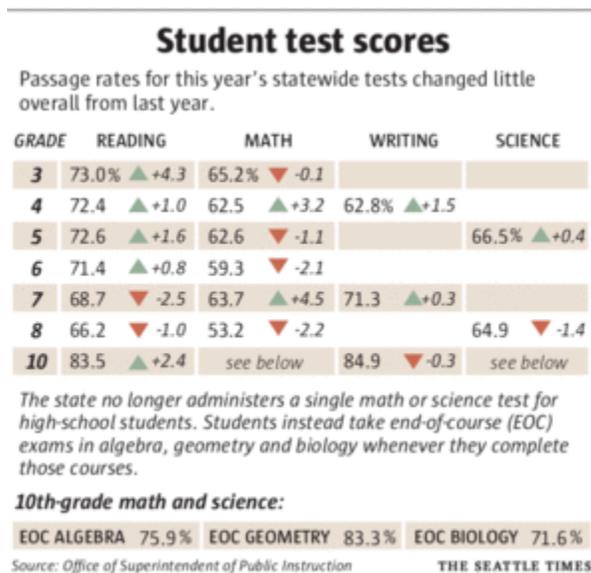
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State's student test scores mostly unchanged in 2013

One of the bright spots was Rainier Beach High School, where the reading passage rate for 10th-graders shot up more than 16 percentage points.

By Linda Shaw

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Washington students made little or no overall improvement this year on state tests in reading, writing, math and science, making small gains in some grades and subjects, and losing ground in others.

So state Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn took a longer view.

In a news conference Monday, he stressed that students have made a lot of progress over the past decade, and could make even bigger gains if state lawmakers, as ordered by the Washington Supreme Court, continue to raise the amount the state spends on public schools.

“If we’re going to significantly move the needle in performance, it’s going to take a bigger investment in the kids that aren’t

making their performance level,” he said.

All public-school students in Washington take state tests each spring. Reading and math exams are given in grades 3-8. Students in grades 4, 7 and 10 take writing exams, and those in grades 5 and 8 take science tests, too. In high school, there also is a 10th-grade reading test and end-of-course exams in algebra, geometry and biology.

This is the third year for the latest version of the tests — and they soon will be replaced, too. Plans call for phasing in a new set of exams tied to a new set of learning standards known as the Common Core. Washington is among the states that have pledged to use those new standards, which cover reading and math.

The biggest score increase this year was in seventh-grade math, where 63.7 percent of students passed, up 4.5 percentage points from last year. The biggest drop was in seventh-grade reading, with 68.7 percent of students passing, down 2.5 percentage points from 2012.

But in most grades and subjects, the passage rate remained about the same.

Dorn also reported Monday on the class of 2013 — the first group of students required to pass a state math exam or an approved alternative to earn their diplomas.

Counting students who made it to their senior year, about 90 percent passed the required reading, writing and math exams, or alternatives. But Dorn also noted that number excludes about 3,000 students who dropped out earlier in high school.

As usual, this year's results varied by school and district. Seattle Public Schools, for example, continued to beat the state average in nearly all grades and subjects, and to increase its lead in many areas, especially eighth-grade math and sixth-grade reading.

One of the bright spots was Rainier Beach High School, where the reading passage rate for 10th-graders shot up more than 16 percentage points, which principal Dwayne Chappelle attributed in part to the fact the school has been preparing to implement the demanding International Baccalaureate (IB) program when school starts next week.

The performance of students in Southeast Seattle also improved more than that of students in other parts of the city. Superintendent José Banda attributed the improvement to a combination of factors — from leadership to a concerted effort in many schools to analyze students' weaknesses and get them the help they need.

Other bright spots included Renton High School, where the percentage of 10th-graders who passed the state reading test went up by 12 percentage points.

Principal Giovanna San Martin and her staff also attributed the improvements to that school's preparations to offer the IB program.

In third-grade reading, the Tukwila School District had one of the biggest gains across the state, its passage rate increasing by about 20 percentage points. It was one of the leaders in third-grade math as well.

Some say the lackluster scores statewide were no surprise. Dorn even went as far as to say that holding scores steady could be seen as good news, given that state per-pupil spending has declined in recent years.

But, like Dorn, many observers expressed concern about continuing gaps in performance among different ethnic groups. In general, African-American, Latino and Native American students lag far behind their white and Asian classmates.

"We're still leaving thousands of kids behind," said Lisa Macfarlane of the Washington chapter of Democrats for Education Reform, an education advocacy group.

Despite Seattle's gains, she said, only 52 percent of black third-graders passed the state's reading test.

Others say they expect to see bigger gains soon, given that state lawmakers this year voted to make a significant increase in education spending, and soon likely will have to add even more to satisfy the state Supreme Court, which has ruled the state has not lived up to its constitutional duty to adequately fund public education.

They also hope recent policy changes will make a difference, including an increase in the number of all-day kindergarten classes statewide.

"It can take time for those things to reach the classroom and for expectations and the culture of schools to shift," said Dave Powell of Stand for Children, another advocacy group.

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