



As bench marks get raised, more schools in danger of failing

By Kerry Lester | Daily Herald Staff

Published: 10/30/2009 12:01 AM | Updated: 10/30/2009 11:00 AM

Standardized tests scores are rising in suburban schools, but not quickly enough.

Data released Friday by the State Board of Education reported that the percentage of suburban students meeting federal No Child Left Behind bench marks, as throughout the state, went up for nearly every grade and every subgroup. Yet, with bench marks rising faster than students are improving, more schools than ever landed on the hot seat.

"It's either you made it or you didn't. There's nothing in-between," said Lori Lopez, South Elgin High's humanities chairwoman.

South Elgin saw a 7.3 point gain in the percent of juniors meeting standards in reading this year but was tagged as a failing school for the third straight year.

"There are schools having a lot of success, but the bottom line is you didn't (make standards). That's so deceiving. I don't think the state recognizes the journey of kids," Lopez said.

Across the state, the composite scores of students on standardized tests increased by one point in reading and a half point in math, according to the data. Individual subgroups saw overall gains of from 0.7 points to 4.8 points, yet black students, Hispanic students, students new to English, and disabled students all failed to meet bench marks as individual subgroups, causing the state, along with hundreds of schools, to get failing grades.

"Average by definition are the kids in the middle," said Ed DeYoung, data consultant for Elgin Area School District U-46.

"With (No Child Left Behind), some of the expectation is that all kids should be above average. The nature of the law in terms of focusing on growth is not the way it's written right now."

No Child Left Behind sets an annual threshold for the number of students in all subgroups expected to meet state standards, with the goal of having every student perform at grade level by 2014. This year's target was 70 percent, up from 62.5 percent last year.

Nearly 41 percent of the state's 3,806 schools failed to meet standards this year.

Last year, only 31 percent missed the mark.

Failing in Illinois is, in fact, becoming more and more acceptable even to administrators.

"As the (required) proficiency level continues to rise, we expected to see more schools not make standards," State Superintendent for Education Chris Koch said.

Each spring, students in third through eighth grades take the Illinois Standards Achievement Test. Students in 11th grade take the Prairie State Achievement Exam.

With the exception of seventh-grade reading, sixth-grade math and 11th-grade reading, every grade saw gains in both reading and math scores.

Eleventh-graders saw the biggest gains in reading - with a 3.6-point boost to the percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards.

Seventh-grade students saw 2.5-point gains in math.

There were no changes to the test this year, state board of education officials said. However, for the first time, students learning English received accommodations - including translated directions and linguistic modifications.

While scores went up, the number of schools on the state's watch list for poor performance still swelled to 1,072 schools this year, up from 815.

Just three districts and 39 schools, including John Muir Literacy Academy in Hoffman Estates and Hannah Beardsley Middle School in Crystal Lake, were removed from the list for meeting targets two years in a row.

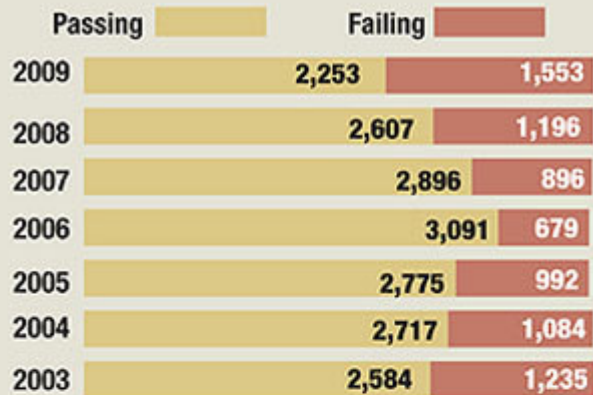
Barrington High School and St. Charles East were among 117 schools that performed well enough this year to avoid further sanctions from the state for missing bench marks over several years in the past.

With standards at 77.5 percent next year, Koch said, the state expects even more schools to fall behind in 2010.

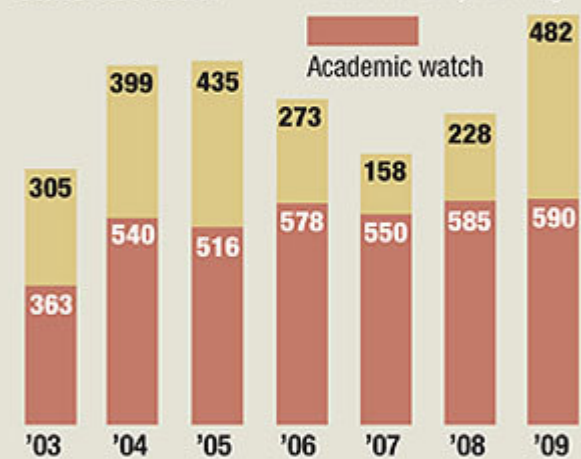
The fact that the system measures only grade-level proficiency, not student learning, is one reason officials believe the law needs to be revised, Koch said.

Report card snapshot

How many Illinois schools made the grade?



Sitting on the state hot seat?



Number of schools that...

	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09
Passed a year after failing	365	330	494	181	218	208
Failed a year after passing	216	248	187	387	507	556

What type of schools failed to improve?

	'03	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09
Elementary/middle	942	814	679	458	568	774	1,025
High school	293	270	313	221	328	422	528

Source: Illinois State Board of Education

DAILY HERALD