

Fresno Unified students improve on federal test, but lag behind peers

By Hannah Furfaro

The Fresno Bee December 18, 2013

Fresno Unified School District students are inching upward on Federal math and reading test results but still have a long way to go to catch up to their peers nationwide, according to testing results released Wednesday.

Superintendent Michael Hanson called the gains "significant," most notably in eighth-grade reading.

However, the district's fourth- and eighth-graders scored near the bottom of the 21 districts tested.

While Fresno's Hispanic and Asian youngsters are making gains, the report shows Fresno Unified is making little progress to close the academic gap between black and white students.

Students scored 15 points below their peers on average in the assessment known as the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA), which looked at districts in cities with at least 250,000 people.

Compared to all districts, Fresno Unified kids fared even worse. They scored at least 21 points lower than the national average in reading and math on the test, which is part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known commonly as "the nation's report card."

Dave Calhoun, executive director of assessment at Fresno Unified, said it's rare to improve scores from year to year -- for example, the national eighth-grade reading average only jumped three points since 2002. "It's so difficult to move the needle," he said.

The study compared Fresno Unified fourth- and eighth-graders with kids in 20 other districts nationwide including San Diego, Los Angeles, Boston and Detroit.

The assessment is rigorous -- most districts got average scores in the 200s on the test that's scored from 0-500. Fresno students scored in the bottom tier of districts in all categories, along with Milwaukee, Baltimore, Detroit and Cleveland. Districts with the highest average scores were Charlotte, N.C., Austin, Texas, and Hillsborough County, Fla.

San Diego students largely scored better than their big-city peers while kids in Los Angeles did the opposite.

In Fresno, the report shows just 12% of eighth-graders are proficient in math. Only 13% of kids in that grade got passing scores in reading.

Calhoun said the material used on this test is much tougher than state standardized tests. Getting a score of "basic" on this assessment, he said, could translate to "proficient" on less rigorous tests.

The report also shows the gap in Fresno between black and white students is growing and English-language learners continue to lag behind their peers.

On average, black fourth-graders scored 31 points lower than their white peers on the reading test and 30 points lower on math -- compared to a 24-point gap on both tests in 2009.

School board member Cal Johnson, whose trustee district is home to a large number of black residents, said the widening gap is troubling. Board President Valerie Davis said the district is working hard to shrink it.

"I just appreciate the hard work of our teachers and staff, and we'll keep working to get those numbers even better," she said.

English language learners also slid farther behind their fellow students. They are now 36 points behind native English speakers, compared to a 31-point gap in 2009.

Hanson said it's not easy to explain why those groups perform worse than their peers, mostly because districts can't obtain and analyze individual student scores. But he said poverty and language barriers likely limited Fresno to the bottom tier, which he hopes the district can rise from in future years.

"Would I like to have the performance profile of Charlotte or Austin? Sure, but we're not those cities," he said. "We don't make excuses for being challenged, we just like it when we overcome those challenges."

There was some cause for celebration, Hanson said, including a seven-point jump in eighth-grade reading scores. Overall, the district was among just three that scored higher in math and reading in at least one grade level.

"We felt really strong about eighth grade," he said, attributing the gains to tougher middle school coursework and dedicated teachers.

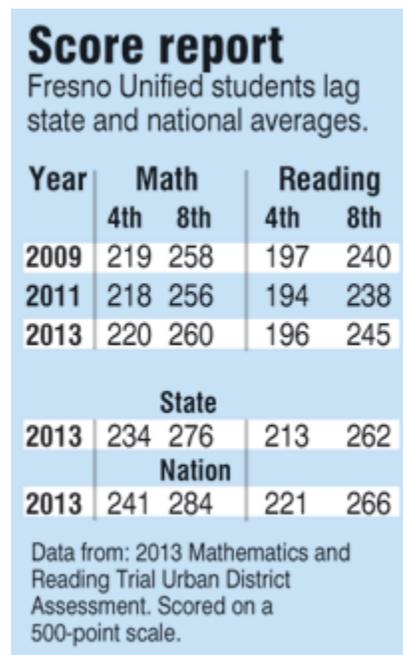
"We also say, like we always do, that we have a long, long way to go."

The test results spotlighted continued progress in math and reading since 2009 by Fresno Unified's Hispanic and Asian students. For example, Asian students' reading scores climbed an average of five points in the past four years. Hispanic eighth-graders' scores jumped six points on the reading test during that time.

And low-income eighth graders also made modest progress -- boosting their scores by five points in math and eight points in reading since 2009. During a call with reporters, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan said the district was one of a few nationwide to raise scores among impoverished kids. He lauded Fresno Unified and Los Angeles for "notable" progress since 2011.

Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, said he was "tickled" when he saw Fresno's scores. Casserly's organization, a group of urban districts nationwide, helped launch the test in the early 2000s.

"The district will be the first to say they're not where they want to be," he said. "But the fact that the school district has seen movement here on the nation's toughest test was really very encouraging."



THE FRESNO BEE