MPR News | Minnesota Now Minnesota test scores stagnate as schools roll out new reading curriculum, standards 01M3SSQKYREBSHDCN840S7WGM6

NINA MOINI: Our other top story today, we have results from this year's Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments. The top line, fewer than half of students statewide who were tested met math and reading standards. Here to tell us more is our education reporter, Elizabeth Shockman. Thanks for being here, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: Thanks for having me.

NINA MOINI: Can you give us the overall picture of what we're seeing from this year's statewide test results?

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: Well, the reading tests came back showing that 48.6% of Minnesota students met the state's grade-level proficiency standards, and 44.9% of students met math proficiency levels. This is a slight dip from last year's math results. But when we look at the reading exams, we can't really compare this year's results to last year's results because the test is a completely new one.

Minnesota recently updated its standards for teaching language arts, and so it also changed its language arts tests. The new reading test still measures how well students understand and can analyze what they read. But now they're also measuring how well students can judge a source's credibility, interpret images, and consider an author's perspective.

NINA MOINI: So some changes occurring. And these test results do seem discouraging. Only half of kids can meet standards in math and reading. What are we to make of that?

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: They are discouraging, in many ways. Test scores have hovered around these percentage points for several years, and schools are just not getting kids back to the achievement levels they were reaching before the pandemic. This is a problem not just in Minnesota, by the way. States across the country are seeing similar trends.

I talked to Julio Caesar yesterday. He's the executive director of research, evaluation, and assessment at Bloomington public schools. He has a few theories about why schools are struggling to get students back to pre-pandemic standards. Attendance is still a major issue in Minnesota and other states, although it's slowly improving. But there have also been big changes in technology and how we use technology since the pandemic. And Julio pointed to studies that show how screen time affects students' learning.

JULIO CAESAR: We have evidence from the American Medical Association that links days with more screen time to students falling asleep later, which means they're coming to school tired, which means they're not able to focus. They're not able to engage as much as they would if they were not on their screens as much, if they were able to get as much sleep as they can.

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: So these are things that educators, families, and state officials are also paying attention to and in some ways trying to address.

NINA MOINI: What are you learning, Elizabeth, about how accurately these test results reflect where students are really at?

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: These results are an important indication of how well schools are doing at getting students to meet state standards. But there are some important caveats. The test results are just one data point at one point in time.

State officials pointed out that the tests were conducted in March, April, and May of this year. As you remember, that was a really difficult time for many students, teachers, families, and schools because of Operation Metro Surge. According to one survey, more than 80% of school leaders in Minnesota said the said that immigration enforcement surge negatively impacted their students' ability to learn.

So officials say that it's possible that negatively affected the test-taking process this year. We also that many students, especially in high school, decide not to take the test. So test results are especially unreliable for high school students.

NINA MOINI: All right, Elizabeth, thanks so much for your reporting.

ELIZABETH SHOCKMAN: Thanks for having me.

NINA MOINI: That's our education reporter Elizabeth Shockman. We'll hear now from Minnesota Department of Education Assistant Commissioner Bobbie Burnham for more on these results. Thank you very much for your time this afternoon, Assistant Commissioner.

BOBBIE BURNHAM: Thank you, Nina, for having me.

NINA MOINI: You probably heard that we were talking with our education reporter Elizabeth Shockman about some of the nuance around this and some of the changes that are happening. So we're glad to have your perspective as well. We know students took this test again in the spring time. Do you feel, similar to what Elizabeth was talking about, that the Operation Metro Surge affected students this year? Based on what these test scores show, are you able to draw a connection there?

BOBBIE BURNHAM: Well, certainly Operation Metro Surge had an impact on several things. And the fact that it was going on during the testing window certainly affected many of our students. And Elizabeth did a great job reporting and just really appreciate her reporting.

And we know as a state department that we're certainly not happy that these gaps persist, and we're not satisfied. And we have a couple comprehensive reform efforts in their second and third year of being implemented. The READ act is certainly--

NINA MOINI: Let's talk about that. Yeah, let's talk about that. So we know the reading portion was different this year. Some changes are being made. So you can't really compare it to past years.

Sounds like the changes might be necessary in what's reflected in these scores. So Minnesota's in the process of implementing this new curriculum and standards around literacy as a result of the READ Act, which you mentioned, which was signed into law by Governor Tim Walz May of 2023. So are you seeing yet how this implementation is going in these scores, or are you able to draw any connections there?

BOBBIE BURNHAM: We absolutely are. Any comprehensive reform effort in education system is a three- to five-year process. And given that we are in year three of the READ Act, we are seeing some very positive growth and improvement. Transformation of the state's literacy instruction, like I said, it's a multi-year, comprehensive reform process.

And just in less than three years, we have trained over 35,000 teachers and educators in evidence-based structured literacy practices. So we need kids entering their formal school years, beginning in kindergarten, to have these foundational reading skills in order to set them up for positive learning throughout their education journey. So we are really excited about the progress that's been made in the training of our educators to teach those next generations of readers using the structured literacy research-based approach. And districts and charter schools began providing this training when the READ Act passed in 2023.

NINA MOINI: I wonder--

BOBBIE BURNHAM: And if we think--

NINA MOINI: Oh, I'm so sorry. I just wanted to make sure I had time to ask, what is the state going to do about these absences that seem to be a really big problem and some of these difficulties and things that they just can't seem to get back to pre-pandemic levels? I just want to make sure we have a little bit of time to talk about solutions that the state is implementing around that.

BOBBIE BURNHAM: Sure, absolutely. So the state is being very intentional around reaching out and using data to identify those pockets or those communities that need that extra boost and that extra level of support. So through our statewide improvement framework, which we call Compass, we are working with regional co-ops. And we have networks of education specialists located in each of the co-ops, and they are working at the system level with districts.

Because we know that to make transformational change, you have to look at the system first. And that's what the READ Act does, and that's what Compass does. We have the Regional Literacy Network, which is in all nine co-ops. So we have literacy experts that are working with their identified set of districts.

And we have school improvement specialists who are working with those identified schools. And we have our academic standards team offering a constant level of support and professional learning. And like I mentioned, we're going to be even more intentional about using our data to identify those communities that may not be, or those districts that may not be participating in the support offered through our regional system or through MDE efforts.

So we're really going to be reaching out and looking at our data to see who needs that extra level of support and really providing them that extra boost to get kids started on a successful path beginning in kindergarten. And that really starts with ensuring that they know how to read and have that skill set with foundational reading skills.

NINA MOINI: All right. Assistant Commissioner Burnham, thank you very much for your time. We hope you'll join us again. We'd love to talk more about some of these changes that are occurring. Thank you.

BOBBIE BURNHAM: Absolutely. Thank you.

NINA MOINI: That was Minnesota Department of Education Assistant Commissioner Bobbie Burnham.