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S.F. schools' results mixed in state tests

Many English learners tested for first time

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San Francisco schools showed mixed results in the statewide test scores released yesterday, reflecting the fact that for the first time in nearly 10 years, San Francisco Unified tested thousands of English language learners previously excused from the exams.

Scores for more than 13,000 students who are learning English as a second language showed extreme highs and lows by school and grade level. Results by race are not yet available.

Overall, scores for elementary age children were strong in every subject — gains that have been credited to smaller classes. Scores for middle school students were fair in reading and solid in math, language and spelling. Scores for high school students were abysmal in reading but fair to solid in math, science and history.

But the performance of the previously untested students drew much of the scrutiny.

San Francisco Unified is one of only a few districts in California to continue to offer bilingual instruction in the aftermath of Prop.

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227, which banned similar programs statewide. The district says it is exempt from the state law because of a federal desegregation order that requires it to offer bilingual programs.

Until now, there was no way to know how the majority of San Francisco's English language learners were doing. They constitute 31 percent of the district's enrollment and 43 percent of elementary age students. The district began exempting such students from testing in 1992.

Some of the key test findings for San Francisco Unified's English-learners included:

■ On average, students who speak little if any English generally performed as well as or better than limited-English peers statewide. Mirroring statewide trends, though, the higher the grade level, the lower the score.

■ Middle and high school reading scores were extremely low, with fewer than 10 percent of students in grades eight through 11 performing at or above the national average.

■ While English-learners excelled at some schools, they failed at others. For example, more than 50 percent of limited English second- through fourth-graders at John Yehall Chin met or sur-

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S.F. schools chief

passed the national average. Around 30 percent of second- through fourth-graders at Fairmount elementary reached that level.

UCLA professor Stuart Biegel, an independent monitor of San Francisco Unified's desegregation plan, released a report this month detailing inconsistencies in the district's bilingual programs.

"The findings raise serious questions regarding the competency of English Language Development instruction at certain schools throughout the district," Biegel wrote. "There is a broad range of inconsistency in both quality and approach of programs from school to school. Some programs are truly outstanding, while others leave a great deal to be desired."

Schools chief Arlene Ackerman, who took over last August, is working to improve the district's

bilingual instruction by expanding proven and popular programs such as that at Buena Vista elementary and scrapping others.

For now, though, Ackerman said she's happy to have a baseline that includes the performance of all students. "The schools set new standards in the percentage of students tested," she said.

Indeed, annual tests given over the last decade by San Francisco Unified revealed a pattern of fewer and fewer children being tested. At one point, the district was testing 56 percent of eligible students, prompting questions about the validity of the reported gains.

This year, the district tested 95 percent of students in grades two through 11, compared with 90 percent last year.

"The district excels in mathematics and the scores in the other subjects are near or above the national average," Ackerman said. "I recognize our challenge continues to be in reading, especially at the high school level."

Another challenge for the district is figuring out how to improve schools whose test scores have languished at or near the bottom for more than a decade.

Schools such as Leonard Flynn, Golden Gate, Starr King, McAteer, Gloria R. Davis and Mission have barely budged in 10 years of testing. Their scores remain alarmingly low. On the other end are predictably strong scores from Lowell, Clarendon, Claire Lilienthal, Lawton and Rooftop.

And, as Ackerman noted, many of the city's high schools are in trouble: Twenty percent or fewer of the ninth- through 11th-graders at Balboa, Mission, McAteer, John O'Connell, Life Learning Academy, Downtown and Ida B. Wells read at the national average.

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