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# Wake echoes CMS in test score declines

## Tougher standards push results down but CMS seems on right path

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Officials at Wake County schools released the system's End-of-Course test results Thursday, confirming what Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools officials suspected: Tougher state standards pushed student proficiency levels down this year.

Wake County educators put the best spin on their results, touting the performance at their three newest schools -- Panther Creek High, Wake County Early College of Health and Science and Holly Springs High -- posting grade level performance for the first time. Ninety-percent of Panther Creek's students scored at grade level or above on the seven state tests given this year, as did nearly 80 percent at the other two. Additionally, three other Wake high schools retained proficiency levels from last year of more than 80 percent, and one of more than 90 percent.

But this year, *no* Wake high school showed an increase in the percent of students scoring at or above grade level. That's right. Not one. And four high schools that were above 80 percent last school year dropped below that mark this year.

Wake County saw its system's pass rate drop 5.5 percentage points this year to 74 percent. And like at CMS, all of the decline is due to big dips in performance on the four tests -- algebra I and II, geometry and English -- where the state raised standards.

CMS saw a much smaller decline -- 0.5 percent -- for an overall proficiency rate of 65.7 percent. And unlike Wake, most high schools posted proficiency gains - - from 7.10 percentage points at Independence High to 0.7 percent at North Mecklenburg.

More detailed analysis of the results is needed, but both Wake and CMS scores highlight the need to address important issues including the rigor of curriculum, the quality of instruction and the effectiveness of teachers at *all* schools.

In Mecklenburg, some have already reached the conclusion that the school system might be devoting too much attention to boosting the performance of lower-performing students while neglecting to help higher-performing students

meet their potential. CMS saw its biggest gains at schools with high percentages of students who traditionally struggle academically -- minorities and low-income students.

But these test results should not be used as a wedge to divide the community. The data show CMS high schools across the board made progress. And those low-performing schools making significant gains still lag far behind high-performing schools in the percentage of students doing grade-level work.

But even low-performing schools had declines: High-poverty Waddell High now only has 46 percent of students doing grade level-work -- the lowest in the district and below its performance level in 2005.

To be sure, schools such as South Mecklenburg, which dropped 8 percentage points to 63.2 percent of students on grade level, demand attention. Low-poverty South Meck experienced the biggest decline of any CMS school.

But Wake's data show similar dips at low-poverty schools. At some of its highest performing schools, performance dropped 5 or more points.

In Wake and CMS, most of the declines occurred on toughened math tests. As the Observer's editorial board noted Thursday, educators must find better strategies to improve math instruction and provide more highly effective teachers for all schools.

Some might cheer the fact that CMS made gains and Wake remained static. But the truth is CMS still trails Wake, and will struggle to match that system's already stellar performance.

That's because CMS has a more challenging student population. CMS is much more diverse than Wake, with a higher percentage of low-income and limited English speakers.

Both Wake County Superintendent Del Burns and CMS Superintendent Peter Gorman seem to recognize their individual challenges. Burns said his goal is for all students to pass state tests by 2010. Gorman's strategic plan calls for 80 percent.

Noted Burns: "In looking at the results of this testing, we need to do better for our children and we can.... We want all of our students to graduate on time and prepared for the future."

Gorman has said the same thing, adding that "we must accelerate the pace of improvement."

These test results show progress but more work to do.

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