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South Bay high school exit exam results mostly positive

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Posted: 08/24/2010 08:05:08 PM PDT

Updated: 08/24/2010 08:49:14 PM PDT

Results from the high school exit exam released Tuesday delivered mostly good news for the roughly 30 high schools across the South Bay, with the majority posting steady improvements and exceeding state averages.

Across California, roughly 80 percent of all high school sophomores passed either the math or the English portion of the state's high school exit exam on the first try in 2009-10. In the South Bay, about 60 percent of the high schools exceeded that figure in math and English.

Widely referred to as CAHSEE, the California High School Exit Examination is a two-part test in math and English that all students in California must pass to graduate high school. Students first take the test in 10th grade and can retake it multiple times all the way through their senior year and after.

Across the state, about 95 percent of all students in the class of 2010 eventually passed both tests.

"I am pleased that the latest exit exam results show that more of our students are mastering the mathematics and English-language arts skills measured by this exam," state Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell said Tuesday. "Passing the exit exam is a high school graduation requirement because students need these important basic skills to be successful in college, the work force, and in life."

About 60 percent of the South Bay schools saw their passage rates improve over last year, and about 70 percent posted gains over two years.

But despite the good news across the South Bay, Tuesday's results showed a few concerning drops. Chief among them were those exhibited by Lawndale High School, historically considered the jewel of the struggling Centinela Valley high school district.

There, the pass rate in English dropped from 86 percent to 77 percent in one year. In math, it fell from 88 percent to 81 percent.

Centinela Valley officials attribute the dips to the school's burgeoning student population and the instability at the top. Lawndale High has lost two principals in two years, and has yet to name a permanent leader just one week before school starts.

Across the South Bay, the results display a wide range, from the affluent Mira Costa High, where 98 percent of the sophomores passed the English

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test and 99 passed the math, to Centinela Valley's high-poverty Leuzinger High School, where 58 percent of the sophomores passed the English test and 71 percent passed the math exam.

The good news for Leuzinger is that the pass rate in math has jumped 13 points in two years.

In Torrance, all four high schools posted stellar results, with passage rates exceeding 90 percent in both math and English. However, one school there - North High - saw its pass rate in math fall seven points in two years, to a still-commendable 91 percent.

"We are pleased with the initial pass rate of first time test takers from the Class of 2012," said Tim Stowe, senior director of secondary education in Torrance. "Ninety-four percent of our students passed the English portion while 93 (percent) passed the math portion."

Los Angeles Unified saw its districtwide passing rate tick up a few points in both English and math - to 73 percent and 72 percent, respectively.

In a press release, the district said it had posted the second-highest gains over the past seven years compared to other urban districts in Southern California.

With the exception of troubled Gardena High, all South Bay and Harbor Area LAUSD campuses outperformed the districtwide average, with

Harbor City's Narbonne High coming out on top locally.

As for Gardena, it posted an abysmal 60 percent pass rate in math. That's down 12 points from last year, amounting to the largest one-year decline on the South Bay.

New Millennium Secondary School, an LAUSD charter that is entering its third year of operation out of a Carson mall, saw its first CAHSEE results. They were decent: 81 percent passing English and 80 percent in math, about on par with the statewide average and greater than the six public schools that New Millennium students would otherwise attend.

"We're really proud of our results and becoming one of the leading schools in the area despite only being around for two years," said school Executive Director Tony Kline.

Kline attributed the school's results to block scheduling that allows students to spend 90 minutes on math and on English every day. He was especially pleased by results showing that African-American students - who account for about three-quarters of the school's enrollment of about 425 - performed nearly on par with the statewide average for math and above average for English.

"We essentially eliminated the achievement gap," Kline said.

In Centinela Valley, teachers union President

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Betty Setterlund said she suspects the drop at Lawndale High is partly explained by the volatility at the top.

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Vicente Bravo was the school's principal in 2008-09, the year the school earned state recognition as a California Distinguished School. In July 2009, the district moved him to a job at the district office and replaced him with Damon Dragos. This June, Dragos resigned from the post without explanation.

Setterlund said Bravo and Assistant Principal Jennifer Garcia "were a very good team - they should have left it alone."

Officials in the district office attribute the drop in part to the school's burgeoning student population.

Benjamin Wolf, the district's assistant superintendent of educational services, said Lawndale's enrollment has risen from about 1,200 to nearly 2,000 in three years as students from the district's other two struggling schools have transferred to Lawndale.

"It was a school of choice - the best students were choosing to apply, and then the school was only accepting the top students," he said of the school's former enrollment policy.

In any case, the district next year will launch a program that provides extra writing help for students in struggling in English, Wolf said.

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