

Chalkboard

By

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I never have been the bragging type. Well, that is not entirely true. I have always been proud of Regenia's and my "boys", Jason and Jonathan. I think my sons are turning out to be fine young men. Understand that I would not start a conversation just to express that opinion, but if you asked me I might say a few kind things about them.

I am having similar feelings about the results on the state test taken by the fourth, sixth, and eighth grade classes last April. The staff is feeling proud of the outcome also. Let me offer some simple statistics.

You remember that the students in these grades are tested in two basic areas- math and literacy. Students are placed, based on their scores, into one of four categories- below basic, basic, proficient, or advanced. The category names are fairly self-explanatory but I will review them anyway. **Advanced** students demonstrate superior performance well beyond proficient grade-level performance. They can apply Arkansas's established reading, writing, and mathematics skills to solve complex problems and complete demanding tasks on their own. They can make insightful connections between abstract and concrete ideas and provide well-supported explanations and arguments. **Proficient** students demonstrate solid academic performance for the grade tested and are well prepared for the next level of schooling. They can use Arkansas's established reading, writing and mathematics skills and knowledge to solve problems and complete tasks on their own. Students can tie ideas together and explain the ways their ideas are connected. **Basic** students show substantial skills in reading, writing and math; however they only partially demonstrate the abilities to apply these skills. They demonstrate a need for some additional assistance, commitment, or study to reach the proficient level. **Below** basic students fail to show sufficient mastery of skills in reading, writing and mathematics to attain the basic level.

In math in 2001, 71% of our fourth-graders scored at the basic level or higher. In 2002, 87% scored at that level or better. Fourth grade literacy scores in 2001 for basic or better was 78%. In 2002, the percentage scoring basic or better was 97%. The chief "bragging" point was that of those 97 percentage points, 72% of the fourth graders were at the proficient level, 7%

were at the advanced level. It also made some “chests swell” that these scores beat the regional and state averages.

In math in 2001, 61% of our six-graders scored at the basic level or higher. In 2002, that score rose to 72% of the students scoring at the basic, proficient, or advanced level. Literacy scores were not as dramatic but scores rose from 70% in 2001 to 76% in 2002 for those same top three categories.

Eighth grade scores in math for basic or higher levels in 2001 were 64%. This number increased to 75% in 2002. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of our eighth graders scored at the basic, proficient, or advance level in 2001 on the literacy portion of the benchmark exam. That number fell by two percent (2%) in 2002 for a total of 86%. This was the only area which showed more students in the “below basic” category in 2002 than in 2001.

Statistically, I doubt if two percent (2%) would be considered a “statistically significant” drop. I say that because it must be noted that the children who took the test in 2001 are not the same students who took the test in 2002.

I think the gains are significant. Fourth grade gains were 16% and 19% for math and literacy, respectively. Sixth grade, in the same two areas showed gains of 11% and 6%. In the eighth grade, for math and literacy, the gain was 11% in math and the previously mentioned 2% loss in literacy. Even with the loss there, 36 % of the Gentry eighth graders scored at the proficient level compared to a state average of 34%. In the same comparison, 2% scored at the advanced level compared to the state’s 3%.

I think it was the baseball player Dizzy Dean who said, “It ain't braggin' if you can back it up.” Herein lies the challenge. Our goal has to be for this year’s good showing to become a routine occurrence. It is imperative, or so it seems to be in terms of the *No Child Left Behind Act* and Arkansas state mandates, that public schools can demonstrate that they are doing an effective job at educating the students who are entrusted to them.

It would be my honor to say that there was something that I had personally done that generated these good marks. Sorry, no bragging rights here. The real work was done by the teachers and the students themselves. Many hours have been spent in “aligning the curriculum” so that what is being taught in the classroom matches up with what is being tested. Those same hours were spent in making sure that students also were familiar with the format of the test itself; that they understand “rubrics” and how their responses will be judged. True/False, matching, and fill in the blank type exams in the classroom are giving way to “open response” questions where students have to write out their thoughts in complete sentences and

paragraphs. With that comes extra hours by the teachers who have to read, word for word, all those student assignments.

For those who question the rigidity of the curriculum, I can only refer you to the state frameworks and curriculum guides which may be found at <http://arkedu.state.ar.us/curriculum/frameworks.html>. I personally find them rather comprehensive.

Remember that when I say the teachers are due the credit, I am not just talking about the fourth, sixth, and eighth grade teachers. To get to the fourth grade the student had to be in kindergarten, first, second, and third grades and so on for grades six and eight. Remember that Benchmark End-of-Course exams are also given at the high school level in Algebra, Geometry, and Literacy. It takes dedicated work at all grades for our students to learn and to perform well.

If the information in this article makes you feel proud also, then say “thanks” to your child’s teacher and give your child a hug!