

Area students do well on MEAP

Parochial school students mostly tops in annual standardized test scoring

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Most Southwest Michigan students who took the fall 2009 Michigan Educational Assessment Program standardized tests met or surpassed state average scores.

The Michigan Department of Education released the MEAP scores earlier this month. Area parochial schools scored at the top in almost every category.

Third- through eighth-grade students were tested in the fall in math and English language arts. Fifth- and eighth-graders were also tested in science, while sixth- and ninth-graders were tested in social studies.

John Berlin, administrator of Lake Michigan Catholic Schools, attributed the strong showing from his students to the school system's teacher collaboration and parents who are involved in their children's education. Lake Michigan Catholic fourth- through seventh-graders scored at the top in math. The system's third-graders scored at the top in English.

"Our teachers work very closely together to make sure that our curriculum is aligned, not only from a grade-level standpoint, but from a vertical standpoint," said Berlin, who is also the middle school-high school principal. "For example, the third-grade teachers talk to the fourth-grade (teachers), the fourth-grade teachers talk to the fifth-grade (teachers), so the kids are prepared as they progress through the system.

"We have tremendous parental support," he added. "Our kids excel in large part because of good teaching and good parents."

Another big winner in the fall 2009 test was Benton Harbor Charter School, raising test scores in every category - in some cases dramatically - from fall 2008.

"A lot of hard work," Principal Tim Harris said. "We have a lot of intervention programs. We put in four specific intervention programs for students not at grade level. We don't do social promotions. We only promote kids that meet the Michigan standards as far as being on grade level. We have an after-school tutoring program, an in-school tutoring program, a summer tutoring program, an intensive program - all inside our school."

The school increased its percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards for third-grade math from 80.3 percent to 94.6 percent, nearly reaching the state average of 94.8 percent.

Benton Harbor Charter surpassed the statewide average for fifth-grade math. The school nearly doubled the percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards for fifth-grade science, from 38.1 percent in 2008 to 71.4 percent in fall 2009. However, that score wasn't enough to exceed the statewide average of 81 percent.

"The major contributor to our MEAP scores is that we don't do social promotion," Harris said. "We promote kids that are at grade level, and that's it. If they're not at grade level we don't promote them."

Students were not tested in writing this year. But students in fourth and seventh grades were given an experimental writing test in fall 2009. The results of that test will be used to create a more

comprehensive writing exam for future use.

Beginning in 2010, the fourth and seventh grades will be the only grades tested in writing.

By decreasing the number of grades tested and instead giving a longer test to just two grades, the Department of Education believes it can provide a more accurate assessment of writing ability.

MEAP scores are used in part to determine a school's Adequate Yearly Progress. Schools that regularly fail to meet AYP face federal sanctions under the No Child Left Behind Act, which is expected to be modified under the Obama administration.