School reforms show promise in AIMS results

by Pat Kossan and Matt Wynn - Nov. 3, 2008 12:00 AM

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More of Arizona's poor children are passing state exams, boosting educators' hopes that recent school reforms are working.

Rather than gearing instruction toward just passing AIMS, many principals at middle schools in lower-income neighborhoods are taking a cue from wealthier districts by raising expectations, offering honors courses and tutoring students in advanced work. Results suggest the approach may be paying off. A greater percentage of students from lower-income families passed the AIMS exam in spring 2008 than in 2006, even though the state increased the passing score, an Arizona Republic analysis of state data showed. Middle-school students in low-income neighborhoods made the largest gains.

• The percentage of sixth-graders passing the 2008 math test jumped to 53.9 percent, up from 46.5 percent in 2006.
• More than 57 percent of seventh-grade students passed this year's math test, up from about half in 2006.
• Well over half of sixth-, seventh- and eight-grade students passed the 2008 reading test. None of the grades broke 50 percent in 2006.

Poorer students, including those in Arizona, continue to lag behind their wealthier peers. Researchers point to a host of reasons, including teacher quality, classroom resources and parental involvement.

More honors courses

The federal No Child Left Behind Act forces school leaders to examine test scores and make changes to help more poor children catch up and keep up. Shortly after the law passed, Arizona schools put struggling students into special classes or tutoring programs targeted at helping them pass Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards exam.

But in the last few years, many of Arizona's middle-school principals joined a national effort to offer poor children more honors courses and prepare those who need help to succeed in tougher classes.

"The discussion is not 'How we can get you to barely pass AIMS,' " said Chad Gestson, 31, principal of Carl T. Smith Middle School in west Phoenix. "It's 'Listen, you have a ton of potential, and we're going to help you fill in the gaps so you can far exceed the expectations you have for yourself.' "

About half of Gestson's low-income students passed the 2008 AIMS math test. It's still a far lower pass rate than the state average but is up from 24 percent in 2006.

Arizona is one of many states adding new and tougher high-school graduation requirements in math and science to help students compete in a tougher job market and be better prepared for college work. That also is increasing pressure on all middle-school educators to go beyond getting students to pass the AIMS.

They now must prepare their students to graduate.

No Child Left Behind requires Arizona to use AIMS reading and math scores to track the progress of smaller groups of students, including lower-income students.
Some still lagging

Researchers are happy to see more poor students passing but say it is too early to conclude that an increase in AIMS scores indicates that children are learning more and the new approach is working.

National exams still show Arizona’s eighth-graders from low-income families lag in reading and math skills compared with low-income children in most other states.

About half of Arizona’s 1 million K-12 students are considered low income. Most live in lower-income neighborhoods and attend the same schools.

But about 20 percent of the state’s low-income students go to schools where most children come from high-income families, state data showed.

Their academic progress is starkly higher.

Over the past three years, when these low-income children reached third grade, they passed the AIMS exam at a rate 10 percentage points higher than lower-income children in more typical and poorer Arizona schools. The students held that lead through high school.

That difference has recently led to big changes in low-income schools.

Many principals in low-income neighborhood schools across the country are mimicking their wealthier neighbors. They are working to raise the academic expectations for these students among teachers, parents and the entire community.

They are creating more honors and advanced courses and tutoring children so they can succeed in those courses.

A 'culture change'

Elementary and middle schools in Arizona’s wealthier neighborhoods have offered students honors courses in math and algebra for decades.

Most students in low socio-economic schools got stuck in the same math programs year after year, educators say.

About four years ago, more schools serving children in low-income neighborhoods began offering students higher-end math courses, including algebra. Instead of tutoring children to pass AIMS, many schools tutor students to help fill holes in their education and feel confident doing advanced work.

"That's a culture change," said Karen Butterfield, Arizona's associate superintendent for student achievement. "Any student, no matter if they're in poverty or not, if they have equitable access to a rigorous curriculum, they often achieve at that bar or above it."

Higher expectations

Researchers can point to many differences between rich and poor schools, including better trained teachers and better resources. But the attitude of adults working with students can change children's perception of themselves.

Researchers agree that teachers who expect more from children, and are not afraid to challenge their intellect, produce higher-performing students.

That is more likely in schools where most students come from wealthier families, said Jay Greene, a national school-reform researcher.
"There are higher expectations for everyone in that school, and low-income students benefit, as well," said Greene, who works for the Manhattan Institute, a public-policy center.