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The Associated Press State &amp; Local Wire

September 17, 2003, Wednesday, BC cycle

**SECTION:** State and Regional**LENGTH:** 396 words**HEADLINE:** Most New Mexico 10th graders pass competency test**DATELINE:** SANTA FE**BODY:**

Nearly all of New Mexico's 10th graders can breeze their way through essays, but more of them have trouble reading or doing math problems.

Overall, 69 percent of sophomores in New Mexico's public schools passed all six sections of the New Mexico's required competency exam - a 2.9 percent improvement over last year and 4.6 percent increase over 2001, the state Department of Education announced Wednesday.

"It's a figure that continues to improve as the educational setting improves," said Jerry Pitzl of the department's assesment and evaluation unit.

The department said 98.2 percent of the 18,910 sophomores who took the New Mexico High School **Competency Examination** passed the composition portion in 2003. In addition, 92.5 percent passed the reading portion, 85.7 percent passed social studies, 84.9 percent passed mathematics, 82.4 percent passed science and 82.2 percent passed language arts.

Students from low-income backgrounds had a total passing percentage of 50.5 percent, while 70.8 percent of students from higher incomes passed.

Students must pass all six sections to receive a diploma. Students who don't pass everything on the first try can take the test again as juniors and seniors.

Seniors who do not pass the test but complete other course and credit requirements receive a certificate of completion. They can retake the exam within five years for a diploma.

White students fared better at the test than did minority students. The department said 84.5 percent of white students passed, followed by 84.3 percent of Asians, 61.4 percent of Hispanics, 58.2 percent of blacks and 49.7 percent of American Indians.

All groups improved over the previous year, however.

Asians saw the largest passing increases at 5.3 percent, followed by blacks at 5.1 percent, American Indians at 3.8 percent, Hispanics at 3.3 percent and whites at 1.3 percent.

State officials for the first time were required to break down results by ethnic groups under the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind initiative.

The test results show that most public school students have mastered basic educational skills, said state school Superintendent Michael J. Davis.

"But with American Americans, we continue to see underperformance," Davis said. "All students need and deserve a high school environment that has high expectations for their success."

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