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December 12, 1998, Saturday, BC cycle**SECTION:** State and Regional**LENGTH:** 376 words**HEADLINE:** **Difficult exam, higher standards too tough** for juniors**DATELINE:** LAS VEGAS**BODY:**

A more difficult high school proficiency test was just too tough for many Nevada high school juniors.

Fewer than half of the 18,752 students tested - or 49.1 percent - were able to earn passing scores on the math test, which they took for the first time in October. Students will have four more opportunities to pass the test, which is required to earn a full diploma in Nevada.

Black and Hispanic students performed dismally on the math test, with only 21.4 percent of blacks and 26.5 percent of Hispanics making the grade.

The test results were reviewed by the state Board of Education on Friday, during a discussion at Green Valley High School.

"I am sick about this," Nevada Board of Education member Lilliam Hickey said. "I am very unhappy with these figures."

The results didn't come as a shock to board members. In September when they raised the minimum passing scores, they were told by education consultants to expect low success rates initially. The board's action in raising the standard was made in accordance with legislation passed in 1997.

Juniors this year need to get a 71 percent in reading and a 64 percent in math to qualify for a full diploma - and they need to do it on a more difficult test put into use for the first time last spring.

Nevada seniors are still subject to the old standard of 70 percent in reading and 61 percent in math, but they also have to take the more challenging test.

"A lot of kids scored at 61, 62 or 63 percent," said Stanley Rabinowitz of WestEd, the education research firm helping to implement and analyze the new graduation test. "Raising the passing score certainly had an effect on those kids."

Reading scores were much higher for Nevada students, with 73.3 percent passing the test on their first try. But minority students also lagged behind in that area, with only 52.4 percent of black students and 51.1 percent of Hispanic students passing.

Now that the preliminary results of the proficiency testing are in, Rabinowitz said the next step is to do an impact study addressing many of the concerns raised - problem areas for minority groups, the performance gap in mathematics between male and female students, and how course-taking habits of students affect test performance.

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