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SECTION: METRO, Pg. B1**LENGTH:** 493 words**HEADLINE:** STUDENTS' TEST SCORES ARE A NICE SURPRISE;
DIFFICULTY RISES, BUT SO DO RESULTS**BYLINE:** Karanja A. Ajanaku; The Commercial Appeal; Nashville Bureau**DATELINE:** NASHVILLE**BODY:**

Results from Tennessee's new student testing program show that statewide test scores generally held steady or improved.

State officials had feared scores might drop since new tests with higher standards were used, said Tom Cannon, assistant commissioner in the Tennessee Department of Education.

The results were presented to the Tennessee Board of Education Friday, with final results of a four-year study on class size.

The test results are the first from the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP), which was started this spring.

The program includes tests that evaluate students in grades 2-8 and the 10th grade and another that checks the achievement of ninth-graders.

Other results show that Tennessee students are achieving at or above the level of students nationwide in reading, language, math, spelling, science and social studies.

The TCAP testing program used a different test than in previous years to compare Tennessee students to those around the country. And while the national standard that Tennessee students faced was higher this year, students generally met or exceeded it.

Cannon credited teachers for their handling of the new testing program. The TCAP program has components that compare state students with those nationwide and determine how well students have mastered the state's required curriculum.

It also includes the two-part proficiency test that students must pass before receiving a regular high school diploma. The proficiency test is given first in the ninth grade.

On the test that compared Tennessee students with others nationwide, Tennessee students in grades 2-8 and 10 had average scores in reading, language, math, spelling, science and social studies.

Cannon said state educators and researchers will try to determine why math scores seem to dip sharply at the

seventh- and eighth-grade levels.

The state test showed that students scored better in language arts than in math.

The 1990 Tennessee Proficiency Test scores showed that 89 percent of all ninth-graders passed the math portion and 80 percent passed language arts. Seventy-eight percent of all ninth-graders passed both sections. The results include special education students.

Individual system, school and student results are being forwarded to each school district.

Also Friday, the state Board of Education received the final report on Project STAR, a four-year study of the effects of class size on learning.

The project examined classes of three sizes: 13 to 17 students, 22 to 25 students and 22 to 25 students with a full-time teacher's aide. Students in kindergarten through third grade were included.

The kindergarten results showed a boost for smaller classes, but no significant advantage for classes that included the use of a teacher's aide. By the end of the first grade, students in smaller classes were outperforming those elsewhere, and the pattern continued in grades two and three.

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[◀previous](#) Document 83 of 100. [next▶](#)

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