



---

## NJDOE News

Contact: Bob DeSando  
For Release: August 22, 2000

---

### **Second Year Test Results Show Students Rising to the Challenge But More Work Remains - Commissioner Hespe Authorizes a Review of ESPA Writing Sections -**

[STATEMENT BY COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION DAVID C. HESPE  
YEAR 2000 ESPA & GEPA TEST RESULTS](#)

#### [Synopsis of Presentation on State Assessment Trends](#)

Preliminary results of the statewide 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade assessments administered last spring show a sizable majority of New Jersey students did well in the second year of their journey toward achieving the state's new more challenging curriculum standards.

"Eighth grade students in the initial years of the new statewide assessment program are exceeding expectations with more than 80 percent scoring proficient or advanced proficient in science and language arts literacy," said Commissioner of Education David C. Hespe. "The only area of concern on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade test is the math score. The number of students below proficiency did not decrease with about one-third in the partially proficient category."

Hespe said 4<sup>th</sup> grade students also exceeded expectations for the startup years of the testing program. Almost 90 percent were proficient in science and strong improvement was seen in math scores, with almost 72 percent of students showing proficiency. The ESPA language arts literacy scores will be released in late September following a technical review and recalculation based on that review.

On the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA), 80 percent of general education students demonstrated proficiency in science -- 58.1 percent were rated proficient; 22 percent, advanced proficient, and only 19.9 percent partially proficient. "This was the first time the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class was tested in science so no comparative data are available," said Hespe. "However, we are generally pleased with the results of this first administration. Four out of five students performed at or above proficiency levels."

There was slight erosion in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts literacy scores. A total of 83.7 percent of general education students achieved proficiency compared to 85.4 percent in 1999. A total of 76.3 percent were rated proficient; 7.4 percent, advanced proficient, and 16.3 percent partially proficient. "We did not anticipate any real increase in 2000 given how exceptionally well the 1999 8<sup>th</sup> grade class did in the initial year of this subject area assessment," Hespe noted. "Progress takes many years and is seldom, if ever, linear."

The 8<sup>th</sup> grade math scores were nearly static. A total of 67.3 percent of general education students demonstrated proficiency compared to 68.5 percent last year. Slightly more students ranked proficient -- 47.6 percent in 2000 compared to 46.7 percent in 1999. But the number of students who reached the advanced proficient level dropped slightly -- from 21.8 percent in 1999 to 19.7 percent in 2000. A total of 32.7 percent were ranked partially proficient compared to 31.5 percent last year. "The fact that almost 68 percent achieved proficiency against these very rigorous standards is encouraging," Hespe said. "But we are eager to see improvement in these math scores over the next few test administrations."

On the Elementary School Proficiency Assessment (ESPA), 4<sup>th</sup> graders posted sizable gains in math. A total of 71.3 percent of the students achieved proficiency in 2000 compared to only 65.7 percent in 1999. The number of students who were rated proficient was 49.6 percent proficient; advanced proficient, 21.7 percent, and partially proficient, 28.7 percent. "Given the need for improvement in this area, we were gratified to see such positive gains," the commissioner said.

The 4<sup>th</sup> grade science scores remained relatively stable. A total of 89.6 percent of the students achieved proficiency -- 57.3 percent were ranked proficient; 32.3 percent, advanced proficient, and only 10.4 percent fell in the partially proficient category. "Since nearly 90 percent demonstrated proficiency in science last year, we did not anticipate great strides immediately in this subject area," Hespe said.

"Overall, the test results for year two of our new statewide assessment program show areas of strength, but

clearly greater work is necessary," the commissioner observed. "Greater gains can, and will be, achieved as schools continue to align their curriculum with our new higher standards. However, taking the scores for the first two years as a whole, they show New Jersey students and schools are rising to the challenge."

Statewide averages for the ESPA language arts literacy test were not released. Hesper said an evaluation of the data indicated that corrections may be necessary in the conversion of raw scores to scaled scores\* to reflect more accurately the performance and abilities of fourth graders. This decision was driven by a number of observations and analysis that demonstrate the need for such a review.

"Our comparison of the ESPA 2000 and ESPA 1999 scores raised concern," Hesper noted. "The ESPA language arts literacy results are not consistent with the math and science results. In 1999, the partially proficient rate was about 54 percent in language arts literacy, 34 percent in math and 10 percent in science. This year the partially proficient rate dropped in math, to 29 percent, and was stable in science. But the partially proficient rate in language arts literacy did not decrease. It is difficult to explain such a wide fluctuation in range in three subject areas at the same grade level.

"We expected to see the language arts literacy scores improve given the tremendous work we witnessed being done in the classrooms over the last year. Preliminary results suggest that 4<sup>th</sup> grade students performed within the reach of our expectations on the reading section of the test. We are comfortable that the reading segments of the ESPA accurately assessed student performance at this grade level. But we do not have the same comfort level with those sections of the test that require writing.

"A disproportionate number of students fell in the partially proficient category and extremely few in the advanced proficient category. There was a performance gap between the multiple choice reading sections and the test's open-ended written responses, with few students receiving a score of three or four on a scale of zero to four. About 75 percent got one point or less. This is not what we expected this year, and it signals a potential problem."

The department had testing experts and technical advisors analyze that data and validate our approach. In response to their preliminary findings, the commissioner authorized the following corrective actions:

- The Department of Education's Language Arts Literacy Assessment Committee, which is comprised of 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers and curriculum supervisors, will undertake an in-depth review of the test scores for the writing section of language arts literacy and forward its recommendations to the department.
- Dependent on the committee's recommendations, the department will in the short term recalculate the language arts literacy scale scores for 1999 and 2000. The department will then disseminate revised score reports for the ESPA language arts literacy test for both 1999 and 2000 by the end of September.
- Dependent on the committee's recommendations, the department will undertake in the long term an intensive review of the ESPA language arts literacy scoring rubrics and range finding to ensure that they are in sync with curriculum expectations.
- School districts will be advised that the 30 day period for reporting their language arts literacy results to their boards of education will not begin until they receive the revised score reports.
- The department will increase the amount of item specific information available to districts. An actual writing task from the 2000 ESPA and each student's written response will be returned to districts with sample score points so teachers and administrators can see how their students fared and what could have been done to improve scores.
- The department will provide professional development opportunities in the area of writing that focus on the rubrics, the expectations based on the standards and the test specifications, and instructional strategies.

Hesper said he had heard concerns about the ESPA language arts literacy test since the first results were reported last year. "We have had an extensive dialogue with the education community over the past 12 months on this subject," the commissioner observed. "We indicated that although we could not make any judgments regarding those sections of the ESPA that require writing on the basis of one year of data, we said we would scrutinize the second year data and make changes if they are warranted. We are fulfilling that commitment today."

"The actions we are taking are technically sound and supported by technical experts, the test contractor and department staff," Hesper added. "Despite this isolated issue, our confidence in the validity and reliability of our assessment system is strong. The technical adjustments to the writing section of the ESPA are a natural outgrowth of the assessment process. The experience will give us a better understanding of our students' performance and strengthen our standards-based program in the long run."

# # # # #