

By FELICIA KITZMILLER/Index Journal

After much debate and speculation, educators said the first year of results from the Palmetto Assessment of State Standards has provided solid baseline data and given them the tools to advance student achievement.

PASS, the state's new accountability test, scores students on three levels - Not Met, Met and Exemplary, compared to PACT's four-category scoring system. The new test also separates writing from other English language arts assessment and, apart from the writing section, is entirely multiple choice.

"I like the score reports," Greenwood School District 50 assistant superintendent Pat Ross said. "I think they're easier to read than in the past."

The new assessment sets Met as an "on grade level" performance and reports those scores for state and federal accountability purposes. On PACT, Basic was an "on grade level" performance and was used for state accountability, but Proficient, which was a slightly above grade level, was used for federal reporting and No Child Left Behind purposes.

"We're very glad South Carolina took the opportunity to level the playing field by requiring students to perform on grade level," McCormick director of secondary instruction Kelly Coxe said.

The largest change from PACT to PASS is the availability of specific data that provides students, parents, teachers and administrators with information on exactly where a child's weaknesses lie. In the past, there was little information other than a child made a poor score in a particular subject. PASS scores students with a one, two or three on several state standards within each subject area - one means performance in the area was weak and there is a need for further instruction, two means the student may benefit from additional activities focusing on the standard and three meaning the student is strong in that area.

For example, third-graders in District 50 did not perform well in science, just over 54 percent of students passed the test, below the state average of almost 62 percent. A look at the standards scoring reveals 40 percent of students scored ones on habitat and adaptations and 37 percent scored ones on heat and changes in matter, so to boost the overall science score, teachers know they have to focus on those two standards.

"That's going to let us know which areas students are struggling," Abbeville director of curriculum and instruction Jean Smith said. "Teachers will make a lot of adjustments and additions."

Mary Greene Thomasson, director of elementary education in McCormick, said the standards specific data will also make scores easier to understand for parents.

Local educators said they were pleased and excited to have more specific data to align with information gleaned from formative exams like MAP throughout the year.

"We are very data driven," Ross said. "Everything we do is in response to what our numbers tell us."

The downside to the new and improved test is it limits the ability to judge growth from the past, Ross said.

"There's somewhat of an alignment with PACT but we're still studying that," she said.

Most districts said they are taking the data as a fresh baseline and not trying to compare it to previous years because there are too many variables.

Though it is difficult to compare from year to year, a press release from the Department of Education said statewide many of the trends from PACT are consistent with first-year PASS results - highest scores were seen in ELA and social studies and scores dropped off significantly in the late middle school years.

The decline in seventh and eighth grade was felt strongly in local districts.

"Statewide eighth-graders did poorly, but ours did worse," Ware Shoals director of testing and assessment Arlene O'Dell said.

The situation in Ware Shoals was repeated throughout the Lakelands.

"There's a lot going on in a child's life (in middle school)," O'Dell said. "They're between being a child and a young adult."

Ware Shoals has instituted a program called Making Middle Grades Work to try to keep middle school students focused on academics and renew their zest for knowledge. District 50 has instituted magnet programs at each middle school to try to accomplish the same thing, Ross said. Coxe said teachers in the middle school work hard to connect lessons with a student's life and their future to avoid them disengaging from studies.

PASS score highlights from local districts:

Abbeville: Abbeville scored above the state average in every subject on every grade level.

"Right now we're all very excited," Smith said.

She attributed the district's success to hard working teachers who made sure every child was engaged and getting as much out of their lessons as possible.

Even in the midst of celebrating their achievement, Smith said the school district had a cautious air.

"With the budget cuts we're concerned about next year and how it's going to affect testing and scores," she said.

District 50: Ross called the district's PASS results "spotty."

"Based on MAP we had a vision for where we would probably fall and in some cases that was true and in other cases it wasn't," she said.

District 50 particularly struggled in social studies, science and ELA where no grade bested the state average. In math only fifth grade students edged out the state average.

"Programmatically I feel like we've got work to do," Ross said.

Ware Shoals: On the whole, O'Dell said she was pleased with the district's results. The district topped the state average in math, social studies and science in a majority of grades. Results for writing and ELA were split, with half the grades exceeding the state average and the other half falling short.

"Being below the state average is a concern," O'Dell said.

Ninety Six: The district put in strong performances in ELA and math, with only the eighth grade not meeting the state average. The majority of grades exceeded the state standard in writing, science and social studies as well.

Assistant superintendent Rhonda McDowell also expressed caution for next year's numbers in light of funding situations. The majority of cuts missed the classroom in Ninety Six this year, but that can't continue forever.

"Next year there's definitely going to be an affect," she said.

McCormick: All grades scored below the state average in writing and math. In social studies and ELA only one grade bested the state, and in science third and sixth came in above the bar.

“Our scores were not what we really want them to be,” Coxe said.

Scores in McCormick were characterized by dramatic shifts in performance from grade-to-grade. For example, in science only 48.7 percent of fifth graders passed PASS, but in the sixth grade 100 percent of students passed. By the seventh grade that rate was down to under 30 percent.

Lessons don’t always build on one another, Coxe explained, so though a student may have grasped what they did in the sixth grade, it may not help them in the seventh.

Saluda: The district's strongest performance came in math, writing and science where four out of six grades bested the state average. Sixth-graders bested the state average in all areas of the exam.