



ChildWise

Exploring Kids Count Data

Connecticut Association for Human Services

First in a series of newsletter inserts analyzing indicators from the CAHS 2003 KIDS COUNT Data Book.

Connecticut's Academic Achievement Gap

Connecticut policymakers and educators have responded to the national call for increased accountability, and the state's educational investments are paying off. According to the 2003 Connecticut KIDS COUNT Data Book, the percentage of sixth graders who scored at or above the state goal in reading, writing, and math nearly doubled between 1995 and 2000, moving from 24% to 47%. Our teachers and administrators – and our students – are progressing, but not all are succeeding. In spite of the improved test scores, the achievement gap between racial and socioeconomic groups remains very evident in our state.

History of the CMT and CAPT

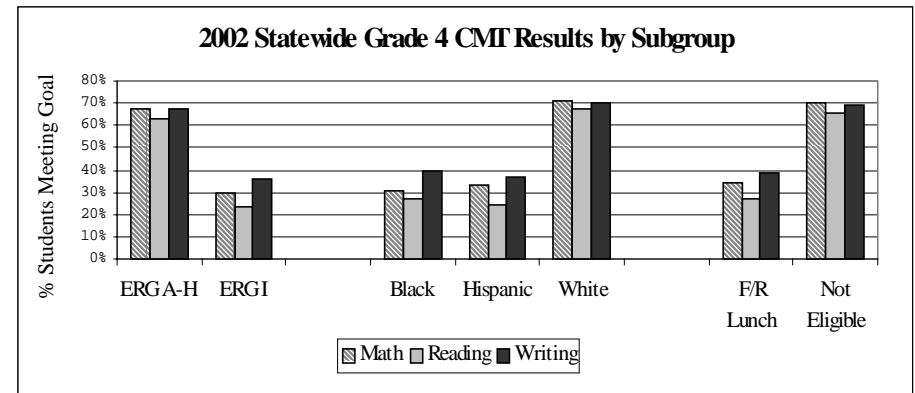
Since 1985, the academic progress of Connecticut's elementary school students has been monitored by teachers, administrators, and the Connecticut State Department of Education using the Connecticut Mastery Test, or CMT. In 1994, the high school equivalent of the CMT, the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT), was first administered.

Test results are reported as the percentage of children meeting or exceeding the goal set by the Connecticut State Department of Education for each grade tested. "Meeting the goal" is determined by whether or not a child's test scores reflect the knowledge, problem-solving skills, and level of competence required for good work in a particular content area.¹ Now in its third edition, the CMT classifies each child's performance within one of five categories: Advanced, Goal, Proficient, Basic, or Below Basic.

How Are Connecticut Children Faring?

In 2002, 61% of students in grades 4, 6, and 8 combined reached the state goal in all three CMT subject areas.² While this rate may appear to be low, Connecticut, in fact, is among the top states in the percentage of children meeting state standards.³ But, as we look more closely at the scores of particular groups of children, we see a mixed picture. Although over 50% of

all students across the three grades scored at or above goal for reading in 2002, over 20% were only reading at the basic or below basic levels.⁴ Looking across the Connecticut's Education Reference Groups (ERGs),⁵ the difference between the percentage of students from the wealthiest ERG (A) who meet the goal and those from the poorest ERG (I) who do so is dramatic. Approximately 80% of 4th grade students in ERG A met the standard, while only between 23% and 36% of 4th graders in ERG I met the goal. A similar disparity can be seen between children from low-income families who are eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level) and those who are above that income threshold.⁶

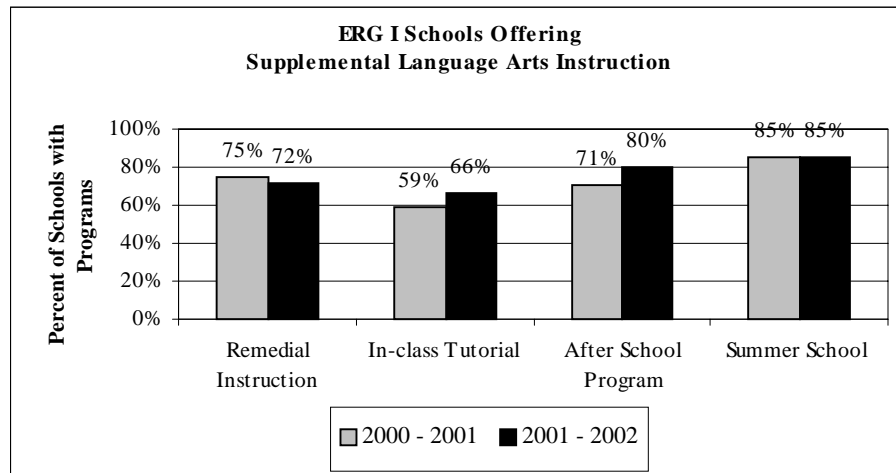


But to end our examination there would do a great disservice to both our educators and students. The percentage of low-income children and those of color who are reaching goal is rising, though slowly. These increases present important evidence that the improvements school districts, schools, and teachers have implemented positively affect student achievement. These investments need to be continued, not cut, if Connecticut schools are to meet the annual achievement growth standards set by the federal "No Child Left Behind" legislation.⁷

What Works

Many interventions have proven to positively impact student performance and long-term success. Quality early care and education programs save taxpayer dollars in the long run by reducing the need for special education and the incidence of grade retention and adult incarceration.⁸ Professional development opportunities and a system of peer mentoring improve teaching practices in the classroom. In-class tutorials, after-school programs, summer school, and other interventions increase student performance.⁹

Over the past several years, state and local investments in education have increased, resulting in a greater number of remedial programs, in-class supports, and mentoring opportunities for children.¹⁰ Professional development opportunities for teachers have also increased in number.



Districts and schools have been fine tuning curriculum for all grades. The Connecticut State Department of Education has published two guides under the *Connecticut Framework* series: *K-12 Curricular Goals and Standards* and *Preschool Curricular Goals and Benchmarks*. Both are tools that directly influence teaching and administrative best practices. In many districts, students are required to write more, reading skills are being supported through multiple approaches, and district curriculum experts are available to guide individual classroom instruction.¹¹ School readiness opportunities are available for approximately 6,000 preschoolers in our Priority School Districts.¹²

What More Can Be Done?

While student achievement should not be measured solely by the CMT or CAPT scores, and school systems should not be motivated only to increase the number of students who reach goal, all sectors of our state must be committed to increase educational opportunities for all children and reduce the academic achievement gap so evidently portrayed by these test results. Furthermore, practices and interventions that are proven to be successful should be capitalized upon and used as models in school districts that have higher concentrations of low-income and children of color. Support for equitable interventions requires a long-term commitment to all children in general and to education in particular. Unfortunately, with our economy in flux and pressure on mayors and school district administrators to balance their budgets, the existence of these innovative programs is not secure. Connecticut policymakers, large and small businesses, parents, and other members of our communities must, at a minimum, agree to sustain our educational investment to ensure that all children succeed and that none are left behind.

Endnotes

- ¹ Connecticut State Board of Education. 2003. *Connecticut Mastery Test, Third Generation: CMT Program Overview*. Hartford, CT: Connecticut State Department of Education.
- ² Sergi, T.S. (2003, February 5). *Small Gains on Statewide Connecticut Mastery Test Scores in 2002*. Press Release. (Hartford, CT: Connecticut State Department of Education.)
- ³ National Center for Education Statistics. (2003). *The Nation's Report Card: The National Assessment of Educational Progress*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Educational Sciences.
- ⁴ Sergi, T.S. (2003, February 3). *Results from the 2002 Administration of the Connecticut Mastery Test*. Memo from the Commissioner of the Connecticut State Department of Education to the Superintendents of Schools.
- ⁵ ERG is a classification system in which school districts that have public school students with similar socioeconomic status and need are grouped together for district level comparisons. The wealthiest towns are classified as ERG A (i.e., Avon, Darien, Easton, New Canaan, Redding, Ridgefield, Simsbury, Weston, Westport, Wilton, Woodbridge, and District No. 9); the poorest as ERG I (i.e., Bridgeport, New Britain, New London, Windham, Hartford, New Haven, and Waterbury).
- ⁶ Sergi, T.S. February 3, 2003.
- ⁷ Sergi, T.S. February 5, 2003.
- ⁸ Osuch, D. (2003). *A Tale of Two Connecticut*s. 2003 Connecticut KIDS COUNT Data Book. Hartford, CT: Connecticut Association for Human Services.
- ⁹ Rothman, R. (2001-02). *Closing the Achievement Gap: How Schools Are Making It Happen*. Challenge Journal: The Journal of the Annenberg Challenge. 5(2). Winter 2001/02.
- ¹⁰ Sergi, T.S. February 3, 2003.
- ¹¹ Benson, J. 1999. *State Mastery Test scores 'moving in the right direction.'* New London, CT: *The Day*. Obtained on August 1, 2003 from <http://www.groton.k12.ct.us/newsarchive98/NEWS12.HTM>
- ¹² Connecticut State Department of Education in collaboration with the Department of Social Services. (2000). *A School Readiness Report: Operating and Capital Needs Assessment*. Hartford, CT: Connecticut State Department of Education.