

Reading in Elementary and Middle Schools: The Grades Are In

The English Language Arts (ELA) exam has become an annual ritual of elementary and middle school. All children in New York State between 3rd and 8th grade take a multiple-choice reading test to determine literacy levels. The prestige or embarrassment that accrue to schools, school districts and localities turn each year's ELA release into a high-pressure showdown – a grade, if you will, for the educational system.

On May 7th, the New York State Education Department (SED) released the 2009 ELA results. The SED presentation is quite detailed, and it is accompanied by another presentation providing “important information about the performance of different groups.” What SED is probing for with this wealth of data is whether literacy levels have improved over time. Over the last several years, the state has invested new funding in high-needs school districts, implemented the “Contract for Excellence” to ensure that new funding gets to classrooms, expanded universal pre-k, and approved mayoral control of the New York City school system.

Did these reforms work? Did policy and budget reforms improve the literacy levels of elementary and middle school children? If we look at changes in proficiency levels, the answer appears to be: “yes, a lot.” If we look at the underlying scale scores, the answer appears to be “yes, a little, possibly with larger improvements to come.”

Literacy gains over the past four years are eye-popping, judging by proficiency level. Of the four proficiency levels assigned by SED, only students in levels 3 and 4 are considered to be reading at or above grade level. Between 2006 and 2009, the share of all students, grades 3-8, reading at grade level rose from 62% to 77%. Some groups saw larger jumps: for African-American students, the number of students reading at grade-level went from 42% to 65%; for 7th grade students in Syracuse, that same rate more than doubled from 28% to 58%. Those are braggable numbers.

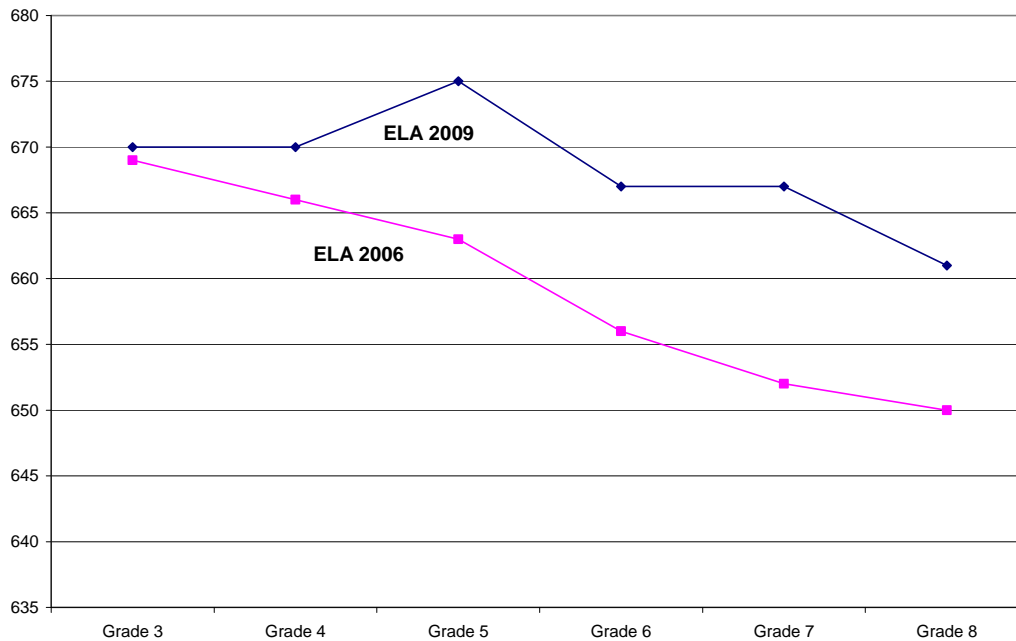
Unfortunately, the appearance of dramatic gains results from a quirk of methodology. Each student's test score is converted into a “scale score” ranging from 430 to 790, which in turn are converted into proficiency levels. Dividing scale scores into proficiency levels is a tricky business: wherever you draw the line, many students will be just above or below it. So modest changes in test scores can snowball into very large shifts in the number of students who appear to be reading at grade level.

We prefer to look at trends in scale scores over the past four years. These trends provide very interesting news, especially about literacy in middle school. In 2006, the first round of ELA results discovered that reading scores dropped significantly in middle school – a finding that helped explain undercrediting and dropout

among high school students. “The problem is literacy in the middle grades,” said Education Commissioner Richard Mills as he released the 2006 ELA. “These results demand improvement in curriculum, instruction and professional development.”

In 2006, the average ELA scale score dropped 7%, from 666 to 650, from 4th to 8th grade (all percentages are calculated from a base of 430). Reforms over the past four years seem to have shaved that drop to 4%. Generally speaking, literacy among 3rd and 4th graders has remained the same over the past four years, but literacy is rising slowly among 5th through 8th grades. Among 7th graders, for example, average reading proficiency rose from 652 to 667, a 7% increase.

**Scale Scores in the NYS English Language Arts Examination
by Grade Level, 2006 and 2009**



Other results of the ELA report:

Scores for students with disabilities have increased. The scale score for 6th grade students with disabilities rose from 612 in 2006 to 647 in 2009, a 19% increase.

Overall, scores among African-American students rose 8%, three times the gain of white students. Hispanic students' scores rose by 6%, also well above average.

Scores among 6th grade English-Language Learners jumped by 20%, from 608 to 644. That may well be the largest four-year increase for any group tracked by

ELA score. It should be noted that in 2007, the federal government began requiring that all ELL students be tested.

Among cities, Syracuse seems to have posted the largest gains. Scale scores among 7th grade students in Syracuse rose from 625 to 652, a 14% gain. In contrast, New York City and Rochester posted only 3% gains among 7th graders, while results were not provided for Buffalo.

The disparity between changes in proficiency rates and scale scores raises a troubling question. The four-tier proficiency system was designed to translate scale scores into a more comprehensible format. But if small changes in those scores result in overly dramatic swings in proficiency levels, could they potentially mislead parents, school officials or policymakers?

Still, the new ELA results highlight some very encouraging points. Scores are improving, they are improving most in the middle grades and among minorities, and they are improving most among younger students who have been exposed to curricular reforms at a formative stage. In addition, New York State is gathering and analyzing data at such a detailed level that future policy interventions should be founded on a solid factual base. And that's worth celebrating.