EBR 2nd-graders show improvement on test

By RANDY McCLAIN
Advocate staff writer

Second-grade students in East Baton Rouge Parish improved their performance on a statewide basic skills test this year, but local third-graders didn’t fare as well.

That’s the picture presented by test results released by the state Department of Education Wednesday after evaluation of a statewide minimum competency exam that was administered to more than 105,000 public school students earlier this spring.

Students in Baton Rouge fared somewhat below the state average on both the second- and third-grade tests, but local public school officials said this year’s results aren’t radically different from the parish’s overall performance in 1982.

“These tests, as they are developed, will get harder each year,” said Donald Hoover, director of research for the public school system. Hoover said he wasn’t surprised that this year’s second-graders did better than the group that was tested in 1982, and he said that he expected this year’s third-graders to fail the exam at a higher rate than the second-graders did.

Here’s a closer look at the test results, which are divided into language arts and mathematics scores:

- On the second-grade level, the average East Baton Rouge Parish student scored 93.14 out of 100 points in language arts and 91.12 in mathematics. That compares to statewide averages for all students of 93.91 out of 100 points in language arts and 92.32 in math.
- Across the parish, 7 percent of second-graders tested scored below 75 on the language arts test and failed. On the math portion of the exam, only 5 percent of the second-graders failed. In 1982, 10 percent of local second-grade students failed in language arts and 7 percent failed in math, so there was some improvement this year.
- On the third-grade level, the average East Baton Rouge Parish student scored 88.87 on language arts and 86.32 on the math portion of the exam. That compares to statewide average scores of 89.58 in language arts and 87.75 in math.
- Ten percent of local third-graders failed the language arts portion of the exam and 15 percent failed in math. Since this is the first year that a minimum competency exam has been administered to third-graders, there are no failure rates with which to compare those figures.
- Across the state only 9 percent of the total third-grade population failed in language arts and only 12 percent failed in math. East Baton Rouge’s failure rates were slightly higher than that.

Hoover said it’s difficult to pinpoint why fewer second-graders failed this year than in 1982, although he said public school officials would like to think that they were better prepared for the test this time around.

“I could well be that our teachers did a better job preparing the students. I rather suspect that we were all a little bit more familiar with what the test measures, and they teachers probably concentrated a little bit more on it,” he said.

Third-graders fared proportionately worse than second-graders because the third grade test is simply a harder exam and it was new to everyone, Hoover said.

“As youngsters get older and they know more, you’re selecting from a wider body of knowledge when you prepare a test,” he said. “You find, by and large, that these tests get more difficult.”

Next year, fourth-grade students will be given a basic skills test for the first time as the state moves on with a program of competency testing designed to gauge whether a student is ready to be promoted to the next highest grade.

A basic skills test eventually will become one of the main criteria governing high school graduation in Louisiana as tests are developed for each subsequent grade level. A 12th-grade basic skills exam is scheduled to be put into statewide use by 1992.

Students’ scores on this year’s basic skills test will be one factor considered when deciding who gets promoted for the 1983-84 school year. A student’s test score, along with classroom grades, behavior and attendance records, will be taken into consideration.

Children who fail either the language arts or math portion of the state exam, or both, will be eligible for a state-financed summer school program designed to help improve the skills in which they are weak.

According to the state Department of Education, there are 462 second-graders in the parish and 843 third-graders in need of the summer school remedial program.

Last year, there were 590 second-graders in the public school system who failed one or both parts of the state exam and were sent to summer school here.

Students who make enough improvement in summer school will be eligible for promotion to the next highest grade level in the fall. On the other hand, students who passed both portions of the state test could still be retained, if there are other factors weighing against promotion.

Next spring, Hoover said, local fourth-grade students and others across the state will likely fail the state exam at a higher rate than this year’s third graders because the test will probably be harder.

“I think we’ll see a higher percentage of failure in 1984, unless there’s an attempt on the part of the state Department of Education to make the fourth-grade exam an easier test,” he said.