Federal officials see hope for La. educational progress

Capitol news bureau

Federal officials see hope for Louisiana schools even though the state ranks at or near the bottom on most gauges of educational excellence, according to annual rankings released Tuesday by the U.S. Department of Education.

Louisiana's dropout problem — the worst in the nation — got worse in the 1984-85 school year, according to Education Secretary William Bennett's annual report card on public schools.

However, "Louisiana's ACT score improved at a rate twice the national average from 1985 to 1986," Bennett's office said.

ACT — the American College Test — is the pre-college exam required for enrollment in public universities in Louisiana.

Louisiana high school students' scores on the ACT rank 27th of the 28 states that use the test for a significant number of students. Only Mississippi ranked lower.

Bennett's office was hopeful for educational progress in Louisiana.

"New competency testing for grade-level promotion should promote improvement in the future," the U.S. Education Department said.

State officials are encouraged by the higher ACT scores, especially considering the large number of low-income students who take the test in Louisiana.

New standards requiring Louisiana high school students to pass more tough courses should improve ACT scores even more in the near future, according to Paul Vanderberg, section chief in the office of curriculum, inservice and staff development in the Louisiana Department of Education.

"Geometry and Algebra II is 40 percent of the math portion of the ACT," Vanderberg said, yet until recently public school students were not required to even take Algebra I.

"Since the ACT is a curriculum-based test, the new graduation requirements should mean a significant increase in our ACT scores within the next one year," Vanderberg said.

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two years,” he said. Here’s how Louisiana ranked, among the 50 states and the District of Columbia, on the major categories:

- Graduation rate, 54.7 percent, 51st in the nation.
- Pupil-teacher ratio, 18.6, 36th.
- Average teacher salaries, $20,460, 45th.
- School expenditures per pupil, $2,905, 37th.
- ACT scores, 16.9, 27th (of the 28 states using the ACT).

Nationally, entrance test scores were unchanged or up slightly, while the high school dropout rate took a very small turn for the worse.

“This year, after four years of improvement, we have basically held steady,” Bennett said.

“In 39 of the 50 states (college entrance) test scores improved over the previous year. But the graduation rate has declined slightly. In short, some gain, a little slippage.”

“We have to do better. Our children deserve better,” Bennett said. “We must redouble our efforts if we are to attain our goals.”

The wall chart also ranked states on their minority and handicapped enrollments, youngsters living in poverty and other characteristics. It also provided a checklist of which states have enacted such reforms as merit pay, minimum competency tests and mechanisms to take over “academically bankrupt” schools.

Since its inception in 1984 under Bennett’s predecessor, T.H. Bell, the wall chart has evoked howls of outrage over what some educators have charged was a simplistic and misleading approach to feeding the public appetite for school rankings.

FairTest, a Cambridge, Mass., advocacy group often critical of standardized tests, said Bennett’s new wall chart should bear the legend, “Warning: Gross misuse of test scores is dangerous to the nation’s educational health.”

But the wall chart also has forced state superintendents and others to search for ways to give parents, politicians, school personnel and other citizens more feedback on how schools are performing.

Several states have installed their own reporting systems, and the Council of Chief State School Officers is trying to devise a better set of statistics.

Nationally, ACT scores, on a scale of 1 to 35, rose from 18.6 to 18.8.

Only one state, Alaska, saw its college test scores drop from 1982 to 1986.

The public high school graduation rate for 1985 — the latest year available — was 70.6 percent, down from 70.8 percent in 1984. The Education Department said it adjusted each state’s figure to take migration into account, but did not include dropouts who obtained high school equivalency diplomas.

The average teacher salary, based on statistics gathered by the National Education Association, was $25,313 for 1985-86, up from $23,595 the year before. The average class size fell to 17.9 pupils per teacher, down from 18.1.

The average expenditure per pupil in 1985 was $3,449, up $276 from 1984.