Students fall short in reading abilities

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A fourth of the second- and third-grade students in Louisiana's public schools ended the last school year unable to read at their grade levels, a state report released Tuesday shows.

But that's an improvement from the beginning of the 1997-98 school year, the state Department of Education reports.

During the fall of 1997, about 40 percent of second- and third-grade students were judged by their teachers as not being able to read at grade level, the study said.

This spring, 25 percent of the second-graders and 28 percent of the third-graders were judged at reading below grade level, the report said.

Most local school districts, including East Baton Rouge and Lafayette, reported improvements.

Statewide, St. Mary Parish reported the highest percentage of second graders (49 percent) and Webster Parish the highest percentage of third graders (64 percent) reading below grade level at the end of the last school year.

The survey is the result of an effort to determine whether $30 million appropriated by the Legislature to improve reading and math skills in the early grades has done some good. Another $20 million will be spent for the just-begun school year.

"That $30 million was absolutely well spent," state Superintendent of Education Cecil Picard said.

He said a big part of the money went to train teachers to do a better job teaching reading.

But Leslie Jacobs, a state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education member, urged caution and said people shouldn't read too much into the results.

"I'm not as worried," Jacobs said.

Jacobs noted teachers "judged their own work." Each teacher judged the reading level of his or her students at the beginning of the year, and then again at the end of the year.

The best assessment will come this fall, when the students' new teachers will judge whether the students are on grade level. That information can be compared to the judgments of their former teachers, Jacobs said.

And the fact that one of every four second- and third-grade students still read below grade level this spring isn't something to be proud of, Jacobs said.

Jacobs also said she isn't comfortable with the report because school districts used different ways to assess students' reading ability.

In the future the state will require local school districts to use the same assessment tool, Jacobs said.

While Picard touted the findings as a positive step, he also urged caution when reporting the results.

Picard cautioned against comparing "class to class, school to school, district to district because everybody was given the opportunity to use their own assessment this first round."

"In this next year, we're going to have a statewide uniform assessment," Picard said.

The Department of Education report showed the following findings:

- All together, 73 percent of first-, second-, and third-grade public school students were judged as reading at or above grade level, while 27 percent were judged as reading below grade level by the end of last school year.
- 75 percent of public school second graders and 72 percent of third graders were reported by teachers as reading at or above grade level by the end of the school year. Twenty-five percent were judged as being below grade level.
- 71 percent of public school first graders, who weren't judged in the fall, were rated as reading at or above grade level at the end of the 1997-98 school year. Twenty-nine percent were assessed as being below grade level.

Ascension, Assumption, East Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, Iberville, Lafayette, Livingston, Pointe Coupee, Tangipahoa, West Baton Rouge and West Feliciana were among the districts to report significant gains in reading achievement in the second and third grades to the state.

East Baton Rouge, for example, reported that 57 percent of second graders and 49 percent of third graders were reading below grade level at the beginning of the school year.

By the end of the 1997-98 school year, 24 percent of East Baton Rouge's second graders and 27 percent of the district's third graders were judged as reading below grade level.

Picard said the program is important because research shows "a person who cannot read on grade level by the end of third grade is unlikely to graduate from high school."

"We knew that, if we wanted to improve student achievement in Louisiana, we had to target reading and we had to target students as early as possible before they fell significantly behind," Picard said.

"While one year of reading results cannot tell us enough about true improvement, we are encouraged that districts and schools are placing a tremendous emphasis on reading."