

Report: Texas' middle school reading standards too low

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Allen ISD is understandably proud of how well most of its students do on standardized tests. But what if the tests aren't tough enough?

A new **Southern Regional Education Board report** focuses on problems with middle schools and suggests that while Texas' standards for middle school math are "about right," its middle school reading standards are too low.

You'll find a summary of the report in the press release below:

Too Many of Region's Students Unprepared for High School; Achievement Not Rising Quickly Enough, New Report Finds

ATLANTA -- Modest gains in reading and mathematics achievement on state assessments and low academic standards are signs that too many middle grades students are not well-prepared for high school courses, a major new report by the nonprofit Southern Regional Education Board shows.

Middle grades student achievement is stagnant in reading and not rising quickly enough in math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, according to Keeping Middle Grades Students on the Path to Success in High School.

The new SREB report was presented to state leaders from across the region at last week's SREB Annual Meeting in Lansdowne, Virginia. It was released officially to the public today, and is part of SREB's long series of reports that show how states are making progress on the SREB Challenge to Lead Goals for Education, approved by a commission of state leaders in 2002.

"States have made good progress in improving early grades achievement but lose momentum in the middle grades," SREB President Dave Spence said. "We can change this trend by making the improvement of middle grades students' reading skills the top priority in public schools, and by making sure teachers are better prepared and that states have higher standards."

While most of the 16 SREB states saw scores on statewide assessments rise from 2003 to 2007, the scores are not increasing enough each year for states to meet the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act by 2014. And the NAEP, often called The Nation's Report Card, shows that eighth-grade reading achievement has stalled in most SREB states and that math achievement is gaining ground only slowly.

Achievement gaps between students from more affluent families and their classmates from low-income households and between white students and their black and Hispanic peers narrowed in most categories, but not for black students in eighth-grade reading. Gaps remained wide in many SREB states over the period.

The report cites deficiencies in state academic standards as one of the key reasons for the slow progress. More states appear to have set standards at the right levels in math than in reading -- with the right levels being defined as more rigorous than the NAEP Basic level (indicating "partial mastery" of the subject matter) and higher than the NAEP Proficient level.

Six SREB states appear to have set standards at about the right levels in reading: Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland and Mississippi. South Carolina's standards appear too high. Nine SREB states' reading standards appeared too low: Alabama, Delaware, Georgia, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.

In eighth-grade math, eight states appear to have set standards about right: Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina and Texas. South Carolina's appeared too high. Seven SREB states' math standards appear too low: Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

Many middle grades students are now taking pre-algebra or Algebra I by the eighth grade, but high failure rates suggest states need to do a better job preparing students for the courses before the eighth grade. Seven in 10 of eighth-graders in the SREB median states and in the nation were enrolled in pre-algebra or higher in 2007, the report shows. Nine SREB states beat the national participation rates, including Georgia and Maryland, both at 87 percent.

The SREB median states had 37 percent of eighth-graders enrolled in Algebra I in 2007, compared with 44 percent nationally. Five SREB states beat the national percentage in this category, including Maryland, the highest. More students took these courses than scored at the NAEP Proficient level in eighth-grade math in 2007.

The report urges SREB states to take the following actions:

Improve students' reading skills substantially. The report calls for states to implement the recommendations of the SREB Committee to Improve Reading and Writing in the Middle Grades and High School, chaired by Governor Tim Kaine of Virginia. The committee's report, *A Critical Mission: Making Adolescent Reading an Immediate Priority in SREB States*, released in May, calls for states to help schools provide more advanced reading instruction into all key high school subjects, prepare teachers to help students achieve at higher levels, and give intensive help for students who need it. The report is available at www.sreb.org.

Accelerate learning for students who are behind. Too many students arrive in the ninth grade unprepared for high school work, the report shows. At-risk students should be identified starting in fifth or sixth grades, and states should ensure that schools provide students with the extra help they need through an accelerated curriculum.

Boost math instruction to prepare more students for algebra in the eighth grade. Research shows that if states want more eighth-graders to take pre-algebra or Algebra I -- a trend across the region and nation -- students need to be better prepared for these courses. This means math instruction before eighth grade needs to include pre-algebra concepts.

Raise the bar for middle grades teachers' professional development and preparation. Few middle grades teachers have training specifically to work with young adolescents. Often, middle grades teachers are certified only in early grades or high school education and sometimes have not majored in the subject they teach. States need to require more specific training for these teachers.

Engage more middle grades students in planning for their future, including college and careers. Following the lead of SREB states such as Florida, South Carolina and Kentucky, states need to involve students and their families in choosing courses that interest them and lead toward long-term goals.

For more information and to see your state's long-term trends on state tests and NAEP, read the report at www.sreb.org. Contact SREB Communications for additional assistance or to interview the policy researchers who wrote the report