

State Tests Show Improvement

By **Donna Gordon Blankinship**
Associated Press

Despite years of state budget cuts for education, Washington high school students continue to do well on statewide tests in reading and writing, and both graduation and dropout rates are improving, state officials said Tuesday.

"But the future will hold the key to whether reduced resources, I believe, will have an effect on students in the future," Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn said.

Starting with the class of 2015 — next year's high school freshmen — students in Washington will have even higher hurdles to jump to graduate from high school: five statewide tests including two in math and one in science, and more credit requirements.

"While resources are going down to help students meet the standard, the standard is going up," Dorn said.

Dorn commended Washington students and educators for improving graduation rates over the past three years, despite decreasing state dollars for education.

Course completion continues to be more of a challenge for gradua-

tion than passing the statewide exams, but Washington continues to have a dropout problem, he said.

Dropout rates have dropped in every racial group except for Pacific Islander students, who have seen their dropout rates increase over the past few years, but every racial group has a dropout rate above 10 percent. The overall dropout rate decreased from 19.4 percent in 2009 to 17.6 percent in 2010. Final numbers for 2011 are not yet available.

Preliminary results show overall state graduation rates went from 70.4 percent in 2006 to 76.5 percent in 2010. State officials expect the extended graduation rate for the class of 2011 — including kids who make up credits over the summer or during the next school year — will continue to be above 80 percent.

"It's going to be difficult to sustain the increases in graduation rates" with state budget cuts taking money away from schools, Dorn said.

"We're going to need the resources for a 21st century education," he said. Dorn urged government leaders and the public to push for more dollars for education, especially as the economy starts turning around.

He acknowledged, however, that

the effect of changes in curriculum, test formats, state academic goals and extra help for students doesn't show up immediately in test scores, so the improvements being seen this year likely have been in the works for years.

Individual new programs around the state, especially in struggling districts, seem to be showing up in the statewide scores, from online courses for students to retake classes to programs that bring dropouts back to school.

The president of the state's largest teachers union said the success on statewide tests and improvement in graduation rates shows teachers and support staff are doing a great job, despite cuts in state dollars, larger classes and fewer people to help struggling students.

"Despite increasingly challenging times, we're helping kids be successful," said Mary Lindquist, president of the Washington Education Association. She said she is hopeful but not optimistic about the economy and the chances of continuing to improve in test scores and graduation rates.

Pratt Park Juneteenth

D'Wayne Stelivan shows his son De'Lveon, 5, how to fold a paper airplane Saturday, June 11, at the annual Juneteenth Celebration at Pratt Park. The 3-day event included a Walk for Youth, live music, good food, a poetry contest and lots of activities for kids.



PHOTO BY SUSAN FRIED

"I hope it turns around, but I'm not terribly optimistic that it's going to. And our kids are going to suffer," Lindquist said. "If I were I parent, I'd be pretty angry."

The League of Education Voters, a school advocacy group, has a different take on the relationship between school funding and student achievement.

"We think the fact that we're getting progress with declining

resources shows that districts are becoming more efficient," said Lisa Macfarlane, the league's senior adviser. School budget cuts are not a new phenomenon, so this year's progress comes after years of decreasing dollars and increasing focus on boosting student achievement, she added.

"This progress says everything about the power of high expectations," Macfarlane said.

Poppins

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tically speaking, they're kind of two separate things. Because in Victorian England they didn't have slavery per se. Africans and people from different parts of the (Caribbean) Islands, they worked in London, you know what I mean? And they may have ended up as servants, but a lot of them were just free citizens. And a lot of people don't know that — that Europe was in the forefront of freedom for Africans and for Islanders. And so they had regular jobs like we do today. A lot of them did have power, a lot of them were wealthy, a lot of them just had a regular normal life.

But artistically speaking, it's very rare — I am the first African American to play a leading role in this show. If you look in London, or New York, Broadway, there hasn't been a principle character that's been African American. So this is a first for Disney, it's a first for me, and I'm so glad because that's kind of my plight in life — is to open doors to let people know we can do anything. Once the show starts you don't even think about 'what color is she? Where is she from?' People just want to listen to the story. So if we trust our audiences enough to understand the kind of story we're telling, they'll get over the color barrier quickly. Especially if you're doing a good job. And that's why I really want to encourage theaters and anyone in the arts — television, film, theater — to go forward and cast people according to their level of ability, not color.

And in "Mary Poppins," it doesn't matter. Our show is very colorful, you'll see people of all ages, all ethnicities, all types of people in our show. And it's so beautiful to bring your shows into this and see all the colors onstage because a lot of times, and particularly shows like the "Lion King" — no offense or anything like that — that are majority Black, it takes place in Africa. It's awesome for people to come and see our show with a wide variety of ethnicities, and I applaud Disney for that, because they do that often. It's wonderful for me and wonderful for the person who plays this part after me.

TSN: Who are your role models?

QS: Audra McDonald, she's won two Tonys now (for 2001 Best Actress Featured in a Play in "King Hedley," and 2010 Best Leading Actress in a Play for "Fences"), she's an African American female who has done a variety of roles and who has crossed all kinds of barriers. An amazing, amazing woman and I will really need her in my book. I'm writing book about what we're speaking about, actually. She's inspired me. A woman named Viola Davis, has inspired me, she comes from the theater but now she has gone on to a life in film, she was nominated for an Oscar for "Doubt" (in 2008). She is a strong, amazing African American woman who is so wise, and so how she has conducted her career and conducted herself as an artist — you know we are artists, we are not just Black, we are not just one thing. We are many things. We don't just sing gospel music, we don't just rap — I don't even know how to rap. It's so amazing you just walk into a room to audition and before I started making my career people just assumed I was one thing. And so this opportunity to appear in "Mary Poppins" has given way for me to really show what I can do. Hopefully it will help others to understand that people can do anything if — you give them a chance to do it.

TSN: I was excited that Nikki James won a Tony on Sunday night (for Best Featured Actress in a Musical, in "The Book of Mormon").

QS: Yes, she's a friend of mine, I'm very excited for her and her career. I am so proud of her.

"Mary Poppins" runs at the Keller Auditorium from June 22 to July 10. For ticket information go to www.broadwaycrossamerica.com/portland/, or call 503-241-1802.

Flowers. Really, are they all that exciting? They just kind of sit there. Maybe they're exciting if you're a bee. Is your wife a bee? Is that what you're saying to her when you give her flowers? "Hey honey, you're a bee." She'll be ecstatic.

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