

Schools will test students throughout the year

By Chad Brooks | Daily Herald Staff

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With more area schools failing to meet standards on state tests this year, educators in the Northwest suburbs are hoping a new tool will turn the trend around.

In Palatine-Schaumburg High School District 211, Palatine Township Elementary District 15, Schaumburg Township Elementary District 54 and Barrington Area Unit District 220, schools are now using the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests to get a better gauge of where students stand throughout the year. They hope the tests will help them get a needed leg up on the important "school report card" tests used to determine whether schools are meeting national standards.

In the report card, released today by the Illinois State Board of Education, all five schools in District 211, as well as some in Districts 54 and 220, failed to meet standards as required under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

The number of failures is up in districts 54 and 211 over last year, and stayed the same in District 220. All the District 15 schools made the grade for the second straight year.

In District 211, Assistant Superintendent Jeff Butzen said schools started using the new assessment tool this year to get a better picture of where each student stands.

Taken on computers, the MAP tests can be given up to several times a year to gauge how students are progressing in reading and mathematics.

Each student sees different test questions, adjusted to his or her performance. The difficulty of each question is based on how well the student has answered questions up to that point.

As the student answers correctly, the questions become harder. Incorrect answers mean the next questions get easier.

The MAP tests allow schools to make changes to the curriculum as the year progresses, rather than wait for results from each year's report cards.

"This should give us a better glimpse toward how students are progressing toward the (Prairie State Achievement Exam)," Butzen said. "It gives us a photograph of where students are."

Report cards give schools a detailed look at how their students are faring in reading, math, writing, science and social science, based on results from the Illinois Standards Achievement Tests, taken in elementary and middle school, and the Prairie State Achievement Exam, taken by high school juniors.

The report cards also scrutinize the performance of subgroups of students -- defined as 45 or more kids who fit a set criteria of race, English proficiency, disability or income level.

It is those subgroups that cause many local schools to be considered failing by the state. If one subgroup does not meet state expectations, the entire school fails.

This year, to meet standards, 55 percent of all students and those in each subgroup had to meet or exceed state math and reading goals.

In District 15, Assistant Superintendent Mary Zarr said schools are implementing MAP testing fully after trying it in a pilot program last year.

Barrington Area Unit District 220 Superintendent Tom Leonard said his schools have been using MAP for several years, and teachers find it valuable.

"The test actually adapts to the students," Leonard said. "You can measure what the students know as well as how much progress they are making."

According to Northwest Evaluation Association, a nonprofit agency dedicated to helping schools improve student assessment, students

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flourish on state tests when schools regularly get detailed and timely information on student performance.

In a 2004 study, NEA concluded that computer adaptive testing, like MAP, inaccurately measured student ability only 1 percent of the time -- compared with regular, fixed-form tests that failed 6 percent of the time.

The study said that computer adaptive testing offers an assessment that challenges students without frustrating them, and gives more accurate scores, more quickly.

Besides MAP testing, both District 211 and Barrington High School, have instituted other programs to boost test scores.

Over the past several years, District 211 has introduced mandatory summer school programs for freshmen and sophomores to keep them from falling behind.

At Barrington High School, Associate Principal Scott Kasik said a freshman reading program, math academy and guided study program for students who failed two or more classes the previous semester have been implemented.

While officials in all the districts say they understand that meeting state standards is the goal, Zarr said it is important not to lose sight of what really matters.

"What we are looking for is individual growth in every student," Zarr said.

Butzen agreed, and said he believes that despite the school report cards grades, District 211 students are making gains.

"I think we are making progress with the vast majority of our students," Butzen said.