

Low scores persist for special ed students

DSTP analysis shows few gains in math test from 3rd to 8th grade

By ALISON KEPNER, The News Journal

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DOVER -- Special education students who earn the lowest grade on the state's math test in third grade have a 71 percent chance of still scoring in the bottom bracket in eighth grade.

That is among the findings of a new Delaware Student Testing Program score analysis by University of Delaware researchers who studied the progress of all low-performing students since 1998. Mainstream students scoring a 1 out of 5 in third grade have a 48 percent chance of again earning that score in eighth grade, the study found. Students must receive a 3 or higher to meet state standards.

Reading results were slightly better, with 46 percent of special education students and 20 percent of other third-graders still scoring a 1 in eighth grade.

Special-education students accounted for about 40 percent of the total number of third-graders scoring a 1 in reading or math.

"Many [educators] realize they haven't been paying as much attention as they need to mathematics early on," said lead researcher Audrey J. Noble, director of the university's Delaware Education Research and Development Center.

She presented her report to the state Board of Education on Thursday.

The report is a follow-up to a study Noble presented in September that found third-graders who earn the lowest score on the state math exam have a 58 percent chance of still scoring in the lowest rung in eighth grade. The chance of improving that score grows even slimmer by 10th grade. The analysis looked at all low-performing students' scores since 1998.

Because all children are held to the same standards, researchers hadn't separated special education students' scores from their classmates. Board members asked for that breakdown, leading to the new report.

"You hate to have to wait for a study like this to put a spotlight on something that is critically important from the beginning," state school board member Claibourne D. Smith said.

"Certainly, after five years, you would think we'd have some kind of notion about whether what we have in place is working."

Noble said the findings have prompted discussions across the state among education leaders, especially on the need for more professional development in math for elementary school teachers and about the adequacy of the state test for special education students.

Some school officials, politicians and parents have pushed for an alternate assessment for special needs students, saying some with severe cognitive disabilities never will meet the standards and deserve a test that assesses the progress they are making.

Pat Heffernan, co-president of the Brandywine Special Needs PTA, believes the DSTP could be improved but doesn't believe most special education students need a modified exam.

"Some of the students shouldn't be taking it, but the majority of students should not only be able to take and pass the standard test but they should be able to pass and go on to college," he said.

The report's findings show the state's special education students need more help, he said.

"The best practice now is to expose all the kids to the same curriculum, put them in the same classes for the most part, and generally give them the same chances as everybody else," Heffernan said. "Give the teachers the tools they need for differentiated instruction ...

"Separate but equal didn't work," he said.

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