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## NJDOE News

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### ESPA Language Arts Literacy Scores Released

More than 61 percent of 4<sup>th</sup> graders demonstrated proficiency in language arts literacy in Spring 2000, according to recalculated statewide assessment results released by the Department of Education today.

At the direction of Commissioner of Education David C. Hespe and upon the advice of testing experts, the 1999 and 2000 language arts literacy results were recalculated because of significant statistical inconsistencies between the language arts literacy scores and scores in other content areas.

The statewide averages released by the Department of Education today show a total of 57.2 percent of general education students were ranked proficient; 3.9 percent, advanced proficient; and 38.9 percent, partially proficient on the language arts literacy section of the Elementary School Proficiency Assessment (ESPA) that was administered in Spring 2000. Scores for each school district will be verified by districts, compiled and released in the winter.

This was the second year of the new statewide assessment program, which is designed to find out how well 4<sup>th</sup> grade students are adjusting to the more challenging core curriculum standards adopted by the State Board of Education in 1996. Last year, using recalculated scores, 59.8 percent were ranked proficient; 2.9 percent, advanced proficient; and 37.3 percent, partially proficient.

"These results are consistent with the experiences of many other states that are adjusting their assessment program to reflect higher expectations," said Commissioner Hespe. "As more schools better align their curriculum to the new more rigorous standards, experience tells us test results should improve."

A panel of 4<sup>th</sup> grade teachers and curriculum supervisors recommended that the raw scores for the language arts literacy portion of the ESPA be recalculated. In August, Commissioner Hespe announced a review of the language arts literacy component of the ESPA. The first step of this ongoing review resulted in a recommended change by the Language Arts Literacy Assessment Committee in the way raw scores on the writing section of the ESPA are converted into scale scores. Scale scores make it possible to determine levels of proficiency and compare individual scores to the performance of groups. They are appropriate for statistical purposes and can be added, subtracted and averaged across test levels.

"Questions were raised about the 1999 results, by parents, teachers and the department," Hespe said. "But since 1999 marked the first time the test was administered and the outcome could not be compared with past trends, we decided to await the results of the 2000 ESPA. When we received the preliminary results for 2000, there were apparent anomalies that prompted our decision to initiate a thorough review.

Commissioner Hespe said he accepted the assessment committee's recommendation that the language arts literacy cutscore on the raw score scale for the proficient and advanced proficient rankings be reduced two points for the 1999 ESPA and 2.5 points for the 2000 ESPA.

"Each student's total point score remained the same," Hespe explained. "But these slight adjustments to the cutscore -- essentially the borderline between proficiency categories -- enabled more students to move from partially proficient to proficient, and from proficient to advanced proficient. All of these students were very close to demonstrating proficiency and should not have been candidates for any significant remediation unless classroom performance indicated otherwise. The distribution pattern is now more in line with our expectations, the expectations of the experts who developed the test, and classroom teachers. We are disappointed there are still two-fifths of our 4<sup>th</sup> graders who are partially proficient in language arts literacy. Clearly, writing remains the toughest challenge facing 4<sup>th</sup> grade students, and there is more work to be done."

The recalculation was only the first step in the department's review of the language arts literacy section of the ESPA. The assessment committee will study the scoring rubrics, range finding mechanism and the question structure of the language arts literacy ESPA and recommend changes for the Spring 2001 administration.

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