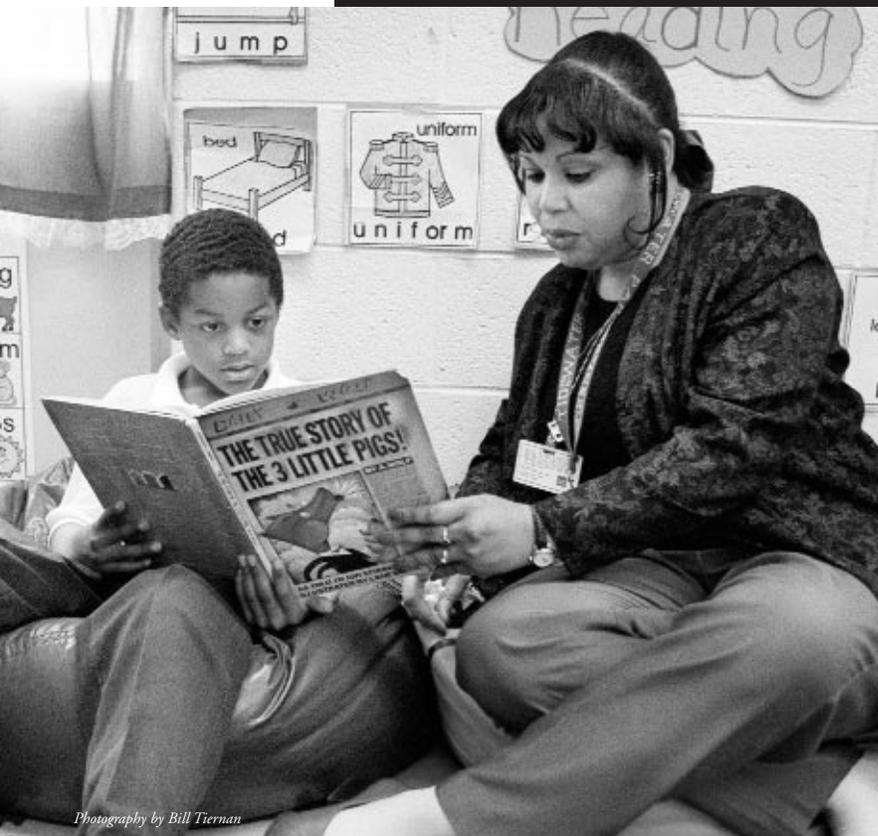


# COMMUNITY

Issue No. 88

U P D A T E

June/July 2001



Photography by Bill Tiernan

*“If you get to the place where you don’t think you’re accountable... then you’re in the wrong field.”*

*Sylvia Spratley, principal of Tidewater Park Elementary School*

FULL STORY ON PAGE 4

## Testing: A Tool for Closing the Achievement Gap

*“Tests tell us which kids need extra help,” says Secretary Paige.*

**U**.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige recently spoke to the Education Writers Association about testing. Here is an excerpt from those remarks:

...While there are pockets of excellence all around America, due in great part to the hard work of dedicated teachers, there are still children in America who are being left behind...

Fewer than a third of our fourth graders can read proficiently at grade level. Based on National Assessment of Educational Progress data, nearly 70 percent of inner-city and rural fourth graders cannot read at even a basic level.

Nearly a third of our college freshmen must take remedial courses...

The achievement gap between our disadvantaged and minority students and their more advantaged peers is real. And as the numbers illustrate, it is persistent. It is those students who are being left behind by our system.

President Bush has made closing the achievement gap his goal...A key component to our success in closing the achievement gap in Texas was testing...But I know testing is a very broad term, and that’s why I want to focus on it today. It means different things to different people. If I asked five of you what

is interesting about testing, you would give me five different answers.

There are good tests and bad tests, there are also many uses for tests. I know this. So I need to emphasize that we are talking about achievement tests that are aligned with standards, objectives, and curriculum and that are used to measure and understand progress toward mastery of those standards. These tests are the best tool we have for discovering which schools, and which methods, are succeeding, and also for doing the same for each child.

At the community level, tests of student achievement help us to define suc-

## COMMENTS

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*Community Update* contains news and information about public and private organizations for the reader's information. Inclusion does not constitute an endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any products or services offered or views expressed.

## Computer Profile Gives Teachers a New Tool

In the Houston Independent School District, teachers can take a closer look at the academic strengths and weaknesses of their students with an online tool that reports performance on national and state assessments. A biology high school teacher, for example, can pull up data on a computer and locate what percentage of her students answered incorrectly those questions tied to "acquiring and organizing scientific data," one of the science objectives they must master.

With a new computerized system developed by Houston, educators can use a wide range of performance data to pinpoint effective ways to improve student achievement.

Currently used by 75 of 330 schools in the district, the student profile system combines individual student demographics with results from several tests: the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, Stanford-9, and Aprenda 2 achievement tests.

"One test is only a snapshot of student progress," says Mark Shenker, who works on instructional technology for the southwestern section of the district. "The profile system is an eye-opener for a lot of teachers because it reveals a pattern

of academic behavior over years, which helps teachers target those areas for improvement."

With a 40-percent mobility rate among students, the largest public school system in Texas needed a dynamic system that could provide up-to-date information on student populations at each school location and in each classroom. In 1999, Houston's information and technology department, along with principals across the district, partnered with the community to develop an in-house system. The program is available through Microsoft Access on the district's network.

Before the "profiler" package was developed, school administrators and teachers would spend hours analyzing lists of handwritten student scores. Now, data is categorized by individual student achievement against state objectives as well as by class performance. Through training provided by the district, teachers learn to interpret the aggregation of data and eventually filter the numbers into a plan for addressing any student's remedial needs.

For more information, e-mail [studentachievement@houstonisd.org](mailto:studentachievement@houstonisd.org).

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

cess in terms of student performance—not spending. To focus on the outputs of our system, not the inputs. At the classroom level, testing also helps teachers. Tests tell us which kids need extra help, and what kind of help fits each child. And at the level of the child, test results also give parents information and control over their children's education. Some parents don't even know their children's schools are failing. Some parents don't even know their children are failing.

Tests help us give each child an academic identity...

The president's plan calls specifically

for disaggregation of state test data, and requires states to measure progress in closing the achievement gap as one of the criteria for statewide success...

I will have a big role in following up with states. I will ensure that their testing and accountability plans will measure every student against high standards, and we will hold schools accountable for the results...

For decades, we have determined success based on dollars, not scores... When I was superintendent in Houston, we measured success through student performance, not more money for the system. In Washington, D.C.,

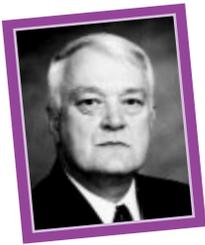
right now, there is support for education funding in all quarters. But the reform is more important. If money alone were the answer, our problems would have been solved 20 years ago. If more money were the answer, children of all races would be reading and doing math at or above grade level...

The achievement gap is real. We cannot close our eyes to our problems. There is too much at stake. We must all work together to ensure that no child is left behind...

For a full text of these remarks, visit [www.ed.gov/Speeches](http://www.ed.gov/Speeches).

# Good Enough—Isn't

By Norman Higgins, *Dover-Foxcroft, Maine*



“My teachers don't believe I can learn,” Mickey explained during an inquiry by the Maine Commission on the Common Core of

Learning. The other 19 student participants then turned to me—their high school principal—for a response. Twenty years of experience as a teacher and principal had not prepared me to respond to an indictment of our school that all of us at that moment intuitively knew to be true.

Our school, Piscataquis Community High, is located in the rural Appalachian Highlands of Maine. The school had a historical pattern of low academic performance, which the community accepted. The students scored in the lowest 10 percent on all academic areas of Maine's Educational Assessments. The dropout rate exceeded the state average and postsecondary acceptance rates were half the norm. But what could you expect of students who lived in the state's poorest county and attended a school with one of the lowest per-pupil expenditures in the state?

A few weeks after hearing Mickey's words, I asked six veteran teachers to join me in redesigning our school. Our goal was to ensure that those words would never be repeated.

After months of engagement with the community, parents, staff and students, a basic principle was apparent: all students should have equitable access to a demanding standards-based curriculum. We believed that higher expectations would lead to increased academic achievement, resulting in higher levels of aspiration. The past would no longer be an excuse for poor performance.

The foundation for our standards-based design was a common core of learning for all students in an untracked classroom environment.

Algebra, chemistry, biology and physics were required for everyone. Foreign language, the arts, history, citizenship and four years of classical literature also were requirements.

Learning in every classroom became centered on inquiry and cooperation. Individual learning styles, aptitudes and abilities were recognized and incorporated into the classroom experiences. We witnessed the transformation of a traditional learning environment designed for the success of a *few* students into a culture that held high expectations for *all* students.

The results exceeded our expectations. Performance on the Maine Educational Assessments skyrocketed to the top 10 percent. Reading scores were first in the state in 1997 and again in 1998 when science was also top-rated. Cynics assumed the academic performance resulted from increased dropouts who could not perform at higher levels, yet in 1997 the state recognized us for reducing the dropout rate for four consecutive years—the same years that our standards-based curriculum was implemented!

I am often asked if standards make a difference. While data can be convincing, I usually share a personal experience that illustrates the transformation of Mickey's school. A student speaker at a school assembly captured our experience with these words: “I'm a special education student. Even though my dad doesn't think I'm very smart, I'm going to college next year.” She hesitated and continued, “Because my teachers believe I can learn.” At that moment I knew that our standards-based journey was making a profound difference in the lives of our students during their high school years and beyond.

*Norman Higgins has been a public school educator for 32 years in Maine. He is a member of the Board of Directors for the Council for Basic Education and is the current director of the Center for Inquiry for Secondary Education at the Maine Department of Education.*

## Satellite Town Meeting



Tuesday, June 19  
8:00 p.m.–9:00 p.m. E.T.

Across the nation, schools and communities are learning that one critical way to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their peers is to insist on high standards for all. When all the essential elements of the school—including instruction, curricula and professional development—are aligned with those high standards, students have their best opportunity to achieve. And when tests measure student progress in the essential knowledge and skills established by the standards, teachers, parents and policymakers have the information they need to ensure that children can reach academic success.

“High Standards and Accountability: Helping All Students Achieve” will be the topic of Secretary Paige's next Satellite Town Meeting on June 19. To join the Satellite Town Meeting, call 1-800-USA-LEARN (1-800-872-5327), or visit [www.ed.gov/satelliteevent](http://www.ed.gov/satelliteevent). Also, view live or archived Webcasts of the meeting by visiting Apple Computer's Apple Learning Interchange at <http://ali.apple.com/events/aliqtv/>.

The Satellite Town Meeting is produced by the U.S. Department of Education in partnership with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Alliance of Business, with support from the Bayer Foundation, the Procter and Gamble Fund and Target Stores.

## Correction

**Please note:** A story in the April issue on the Margaret Cone Head Start Center inadvertently contained a hyphen in the Web address for information on the LEAP program. The correct address is [www.ti.com/corp/docs/company/citizen/foundation/leapsounds/learning.shtml](http://www.ti.com/corp/docs/company/citizen/foundation/leapsounds/learning.shtml).



# ACHIEVING HIGH

*A Virginia School Raises Expectations and Proves Every Child Can Succeed*

BY NICOLE ASHBY

Before summer recess begins, Tidewater Park Elementary School will be getting back test scores that chart how well its students are measuring up against state standards. Last year, 75 percent of students in the Norfolk, Virginia, school passed every subject area on the state exam—an impressive leap when just two years prior not a single fifth-grader passed the history or science portion of the test.

“The first year the test scores came out, they were supposed to be baseline data. But everywhere we went we were haunted by those scores,” recalls Tidewater Park’s principal Sylvia Spratley.

The 1998 report, which also showed that less than a quarter of third-graders at Tidewater Park met the basic math requirements, marked the first year Virginia students were taking the test. Many schools in the Commonwealth, however, did not fare well on the new exam, which was based on the newly adopted and rigorous Standards of Learning (SOL). As part of Virginia’s education plan, the standards were put

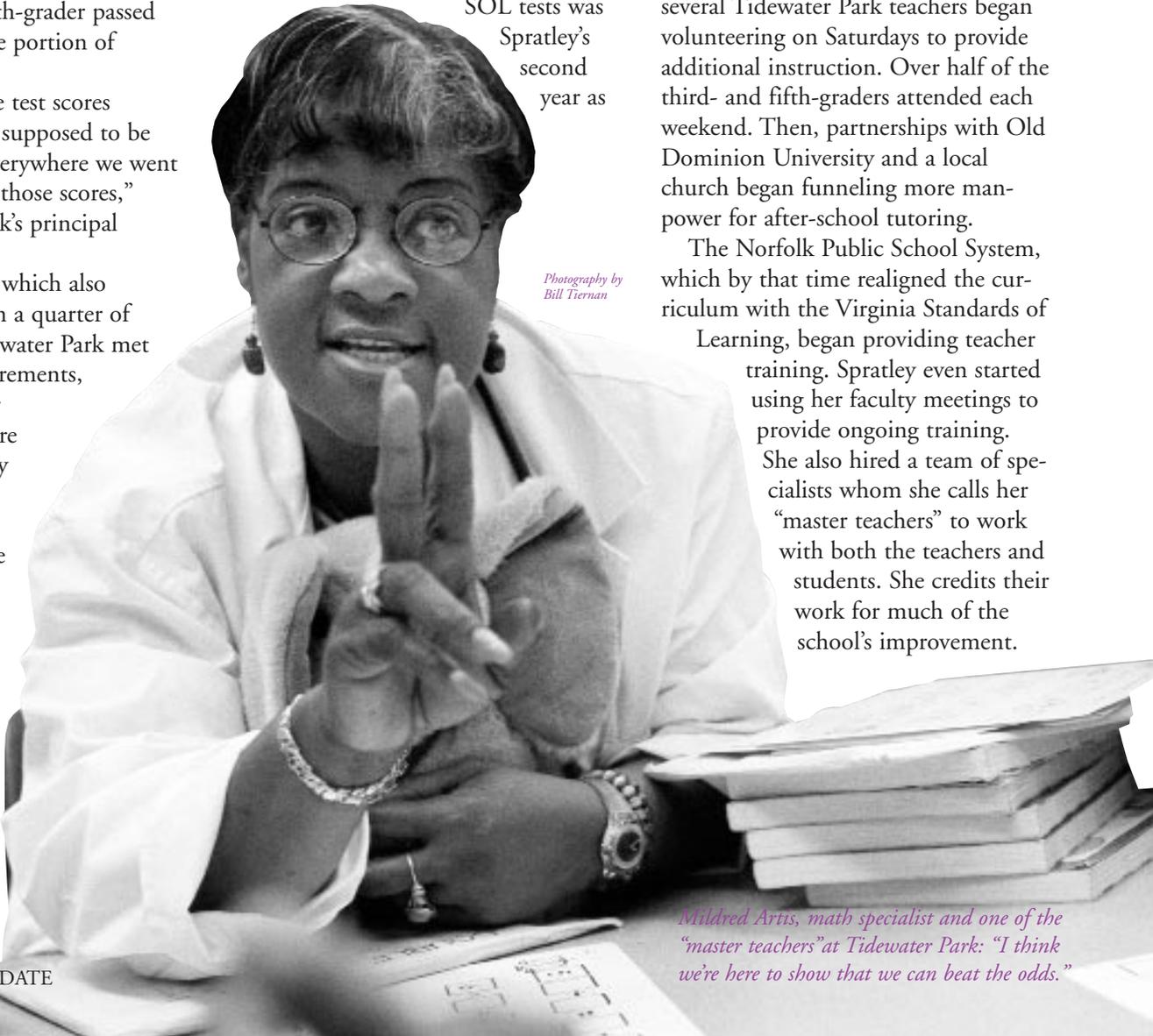
into place in 1995 as guides to districts and schools on what all students should know in four core subjects: English, mathematics, science, and history and social science. The assessments are administered in grades three, five and eight, as well as in selected high school courses.

The year Virginia first gave the SOL tests was Spratley’s second year as

principal at Tidewater Park. Although already challenged by the school’s poor results on other standardized tests, Spratley said the state scores better focused her on the strategies needed for improving student achievement, prompting her and support staff to “work around the clock.”

When school reopened in fall 1998, several Tidewater Park teachers began volunteering on Saturdays to provide additional instruction. Over half of the third- and fifth-graders attended each weekend. Then, partnerships with Old Dominion University and a local church began funneling more manpower for after-school tutoring.

The Norfolk Public School System, which by that time realigned the curriculum with the Virginia Standards of Learning, began providing teacher training. Spratley even started using her faculty meetings to provide ongoing training. She also hired a team of specialists whom she calls her “master teachers” to work with both the teachers and students. She credits their work for much of the school’s improvement.



*Photography by Bill Tiernan*

*Mildred Artis, math specialist and one of the “master teachers” at Tidewater Park: “I think we’re here to show that we can beat the odds.”*



*Principal Sylvia Spratley.*

Additionally, each class was either reduced to a maximum of 19 students or team-taught for larger numbers.

As a result, classes became more academically rigorous, lesson plans standards-driven, and every minute accounted for, which Spratley refers to as “time on task.” Time was blocked in the morning to teach communications skills and in the afternoon for math, history and social science.

Spratley also began hosting monthly “SOL Training Dinners” for the parents, posting the test scores on the wall, explaining to them, “This is where we are,” and then pointing to the standards saying, “This is where we have to go.”

The fruit of Tidewater Park’s labor was immediately evident: 1999 test scores for fifth-graders on the English exam rose to 43 percent, up from 18 percent in the previous year, and to 81 percent on the 2000 results.

### **One Standard for All**

Spratley says that the remedial efforts were easy compared to her greatest challenge. “One of my hardest tasks is to continue to foster the thought that we have to expect our children to learn,” she says passionately. “It is not okay for our children to receive dumb-down instruction...Challenge their minds.”

She says because low income too often is tied to low expectations, the

victory of Tidewater Park—where 88 percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch—was often met with disbelief.

Nonetheless, for the first time Spratley says she sees pride from the community, students and teachers. She considers having higher expectations, bolstered with state standards, to be a catalyst for that change. “Now everyone has something to work towards,” she explains. “So there isn’t a standard over here for Taylor Elementary—a wealthy school—and a standard over here for Tidewater Park. My students have to meet the same standard that children from other schools and other socio-economic backgrounds meet.”

She says teaching content tied to standards beginning in kindergarten helps start children on an equal footing. Angela West, whose fifth-grade daughter and youngest son attend Tidewater Park, agrees. “It’s a little harder for my daughter because she didn’t start out doing the SOL, but my son has to know these 20 words to pass and he knows them. He already knows how to read in kindergarten,” she muses.

### **‘69 1/2 Won’t Do’**

In the end, an accountability system, in which each stakeholder is held responsible for student achievement, must accompany the standards.

Spratley, who says she holds teachers accountable just as she is held accountable by the superintendent, expects every Tidewater Park student to master at least 70 percent of the SOL. “I say to my teachers, ‘Now, 69 1/2 won’t do,’” she says, but stresses, “The goal really is to get all of our students to meet the standards because even if we have 75 percent, we’ve left some children behind.” Test data, which can be disaggregated by teacher to reveal whose students are not performing, is tied closely to end-of-the-year evaluations.

Consequently, Lisa Ellick admits feeling pressure in teaching the third grade, the level when students are first

tested on the SOLs. “We have to think of creative ways to get them to review those previous years along with focusing on the content that they need for the third grade,” she says.

Although there are no measures for holding parents equally responsible, Spratley says the lack of parent involvement does not release educators from helping students progress. “If you get to the place where you don’t think you’re accountable ‘because the mothers didn’t do something,’ then you’re in the wrong field,” she asserts.

Low-test results are also a determining factor for promotion to the next grade. Therefore, Tidewater Park employs innovative methods for teaching children that rewards and sanctions accompany their responsibility to learn.

For example, the “Conduct Chart,” an idea from Old Dominion University, starts every child off each day with a green dot for superb behavior. Any infraction changes the dot through several coded colors that eventually end in a gold dot, the most serious offense: a conference with the parent. But the students are always given opportunities to redeem their “green” status.

By 2007, every school in Virginia will have to meet new criteria, which requires that 70 percent of students pass the tests in order for the school to receive accreditation.

Spratley, who says such requirements are at times needed to drive change, adds, “I think the accountability piece will be around for a long time, and not only for Virginia, because I’ve met principals from other states. The accountability idea is out there, so we either have to come aboard or get off.”

For more information about Virginia’s Standards of Learning, visit [www.pen.k12.va.us](http://www.pen.k12.va.us). To learn more about the success of Tidewater Park, visit [www.nps.k12.va.us/schools/tidewaterpark/index.htm](http://www.nps.k12.va.us/schools/tidewaterpark/index.htm), or call 757-628-2500.



# PARTNERSHIP

## *for Family Involvement in Education*

*A coalition of more than 7,200 education, community, religious and business organizations nationwide.  
To join the Partnership, call 1-800-USA-LEARN or visit <http://pfie.ed.gov>.*

## Chicago Uses ACT Assessments to Urge Students to Achieve

Best known for the ACT Assessment®—a college admission and placement examination taken by more than one million high school students each year—ACT, Inc. is an independent, not-for-profit organization that offers more than a hundred assessment, research and program management services in education planning, career planning and workforce development. Though designed to meet a wide array of needs, all ACT programs and services have one guiding purpose: to help people achieve their education and career goals.

An astounding 85 percent of Chicago's 430,000 public school students are economically disadvantaged. To help them succeed, the Chicago Public School System has adopted EXPLORE® and PLAN®, programs offered by ACT, Inc., as assessments for all students.

"The sequence will allow the schools to monitor student growth over time," says Joseph Hahn, who directs research, analysis and assessment for the Chicago Public Schools. "Our major goal is to get more kids setting their sights on college. We want more students taking the rigorous curriculum our schools now offer, and we want them to think about getting into the most chal-

lenging college for which they are qualified."

To make a successful transition to college—even to graduate from high school—many young people in the Chicago school system face hurdles unimaginable in the nearby suburbs. But Hahn believes the assessments will generate discussion about career and educational planning at each stage of students' progress through high school.

"We expect educators to use information from the assessments to help students think about such questions as 'Where do you see yourself going? What do you want to do with your life?' We hope the testing will help bring about a new mindset, a new culture in our schools."

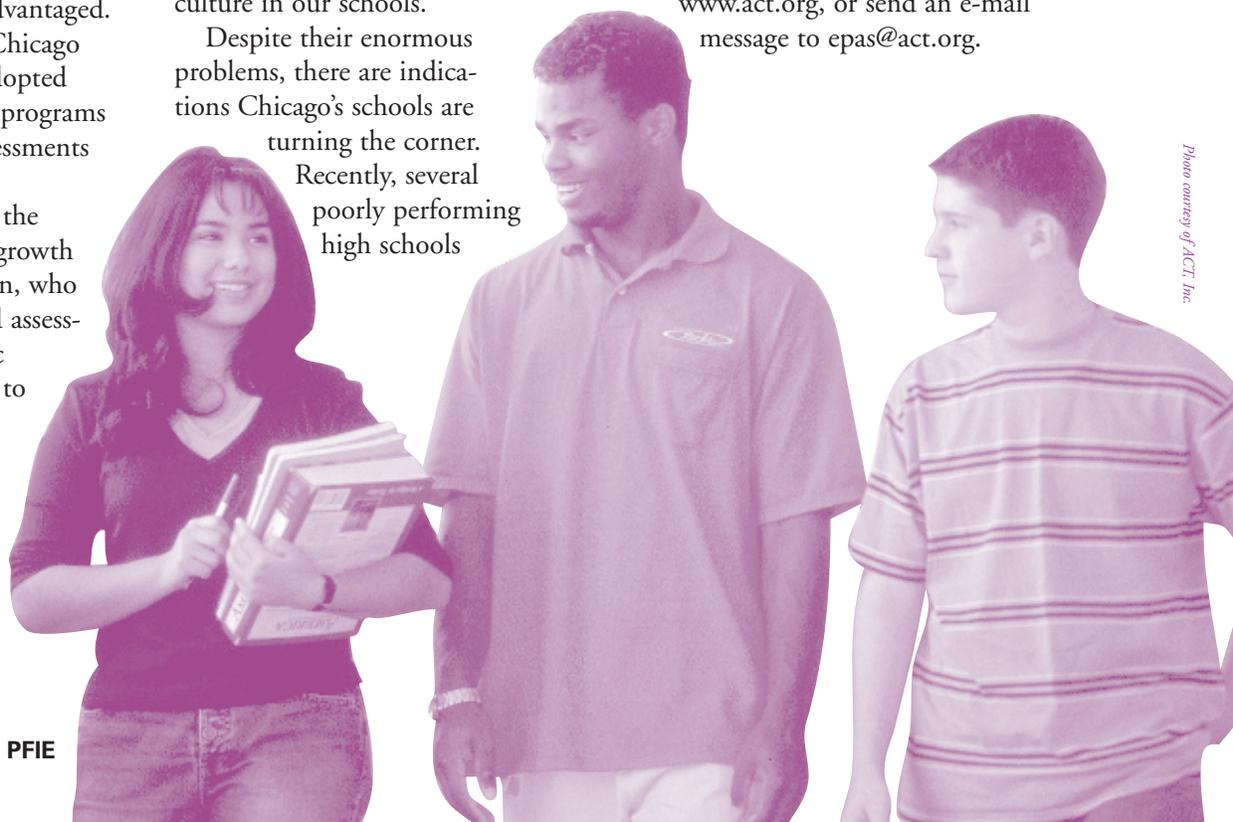
Despite their enormous problems, there are indications Chicago's schools are turning the corner.

Recently, several poorly performing high schools

were reassembled from the bottom up, with new curricula, principals, staff and teams of successful teachers helping the schools rebuild from ground zero.

Chicago's average ACT score, which seemed fixed at 17.2 in recent years, rose to 17.5 last year. "We expect another jump in 2000, when the students who participated in PLAN as tenth graders take the ACT Assessment," says Hahn. "We're not yet likely to reach the Illinois average of 21, but we hope to see more and more of our kids scoring 19 or 20. That will improve their chances for success in a two-year or four-year college."

For more information about ACT programs and services, visit [www.act.org](http://www.act.org), or send an e-mail message to [epas@act.org](mailto:epas@act.org).



*Photo courtesy of ACT, Inc.*

# ABOUT *our* PARTNERS

## *A Roundup of Recent Activities*



*Walton Farm students, who made a sharp turnaround on math scores, smile for the camera.*

### **Walton Farm Elementary School**

This school year, Walton Farm Elementary School in Landsdale, Pa., has been focusing on increasing student performance in mathematics, especially in the area of computation. Test scores are already revealing significant student progress. For instance, the number of fifth graders scoring 80–89 points on a curriculum-based assessment jumped to 23 percent in April, up from 5 percent in November. June results are expected to show a continual increase. “We are proud to have an excellent faculty, interested and supportive parents, and students who are willing to work hard,” said Israela Franklin, principal of Walton Farm. For more information, visit [www.northpennschools.k12.pa.us/walton.htm](http://www.northpennschools.k12.pa.us/walton.htm), or call 215-855-8800.

### **Illinois State Board of Education**

In April, the Illinois State Board of Education administered its high-

stakes test to about 120,000 high school juniors in the state for the first time. The Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE) measures student mastery of the “Illinois Learning Standards” in reading, writing, mathematics, science and social science. “First-year preparation for any test is difficult,” admits Illinois State Superintendent of Education Glenn McGee, “but local districts admirably stepped up to the challenge and did a magnificent job of administering the test.” PSAE is the first statewide test to incorporate a college entrance examination—the ACT assessment—and workplace-skills tests—also produced by ACT. For more information, visit [www.isbe.net](http://www.isbe.net), or call 217-782-4823.

### **Texas Education Agency**

The Texas Education Agency (TEA), which has jurisdiction over 1,040 school districts, including 142 charter schools, employs an accountability and assessment system that integrates the state curriculum. The Academic Excellence Indicator System serves as a basis for all ratings, rewards, and reports. Using the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), the agency also publishes school-, district-, and state-level reports. This spring, TAAS results revealed that 564 low-income Texas schools received high assessment ratings. Passing rates on the math section of the exit exam increased 3 percent from last year, with 89 percent of high school sophomores mastering the subject. For more information, visit [www.tea.state.tx.us/tea/account.html](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/tea/account.html), or call 512-463-9734.



## CALENDAR

**June 7–8**, Washington, D.C.  
*National Fatherhood Initiative's Fourth Annual Summit on Fatherhood: "Broadening the Reach."* Call 301-948-0599, or visit [www.fatherhood.org/summit.htm](http://www.fatherhood.org/summit.htm).

**June 15**, Chicago, Ill.  
*Illinois Fatherhood Initiative's Father's Day Celebration.* Call 1-800-996-DADS (3237), or visit [www.4fathers.org](http://www.4fathers.org).

**June 20–23**, Washington, D.C.  
*"Partners Make a Great IDEA": A National Summit on the Shared Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.* Call IDEA Partnership Projects at 1-877-433-2463, or visit [www.ideainfo.org](http://www.ideainfo.org).

**June 28–July 1**, Minneapolis, Minn.  
*Points of Light Foundation 2001 National Conference: "Community Volunteering and National Service."* Call TuNia Slade at 202-729-3220, or e-mail [registration@pointsoflight.org](mailto:registration@pointsoflight.org).



## ANNOUNCEMENTS

The National Center for Education Statistics just released a report addressing the importance of parent involvement to students' academic success. For an online version of *Fathers' and Mothers' Involvement in Their Children's Schools by Family Type and Resident Status*, visit <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch> and key in number 2001032. For a paper copy, while supplies last, write the U.S. Department of Education, ED Pubs, P.O. Box 1398, Jessup, MD 20794-1398, or call 1-877-4ED-PUBS (1-877-433-7827), and specify the publication number above.

*While these resources are relevant to the mission of the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education, they are available from a variety of sources and their presence here does not constitute an endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education.*

IN THIS ISSUE:



# ACHIEVING HIGH

PAGE 4

## Measuring Student Performance

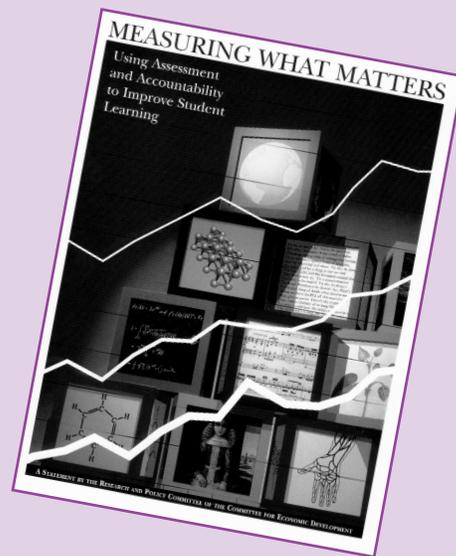
For the past 10 years, testing and accountability systems have become key elements of education reform, and it is becoming increasingly critical for states and districts to use tests responsibly to measure student achievement.

A report released this year, *Measuring What Matters*, calls tests that are valid, reliable and fair the best means of charting the country's progress toward the goal of improved academic achievement, but stresses that tests are a means, not an end, to school reform. The Committee for Economic Development (CED), a group of 220 business and education leaders who compiled the report, points out, "we cannot improve what we do not measure."

The 45-page report includes examples of states that are setting high aca-

demical standards and holding schools accountable for helping students reach these standards. It also suggests states consider the following as they craft testing and accountability provisions:

- Tests should be used now and improved upon—rather than waiting until they are "perfect."
- Holding students accountable requires providing them with adequate academic preparation for tests tied to promotion or graduation and with intensive instruction if they initially fail.
- A performance-based education system built on measuring student achievement costs money. Investments will be needed for improved tests, for information systems that make results available to educators and the public, for train-



ing in how to use performance data to improve instruction, and for assistance to schools and students whom tests show to be performing poorly.

For a full copy of CED's report, visit [www.ced.org](http://www.ced.org).