

11/7/80

# 12th-Grader Reading Skills Still On Decline

□ Educator urges giving teachers more power to discipline students. Page B3.

By Sigrid Bathen  
Bee Staff Writer

Achievement scores for California third- and sixth-graders improved last year, but the reading scores of 12th-graders dropped for the ninth straight year.

Test results for more than 800,000 California schoolchildren were compiled by the state Department of Education, which released the scores this week. Although officials are encouraged by the scores for third- and sixth-graders, the 12th-grade scores remain a source of consternation to state educators.

When 1978-79 scores were released last year, state officials cautiously predicted that high school seniors would begin to show an increase in test scores in 1979-80. They cited the smaller margin of decline in 1978-79 and hoped that margin would be eliminated altogether this year.

But Wilson Riles, state superintendent of public instruction, said the December 1979 scores for 12th-graders are "less than encouraging" when compared to the national average. Riles' research and evaluation chief, Alexander Law, was more direct, saying he was "very discouraged" with the 12th-grade scores.

The state's seniors scored 16 percentile points below the national average in reading, 22 points below in written expression and six below in math. Compared to 1978-79 California scores, however, seniors improved in spelling with 0.4 percent more correct answers,

math by 0.3 percent, and maintained the same percentage of correct answers for written expression as recorded in 1978-79.

Twelfth-graders went from 63.2 percent correct answers to 63.1 percent in reading; 68.4 percent to 68.8 percent in spelling; 66.5 percent to 66.8 percent in math; and were constant at 62.4 percent in written language.

Third-grade reading scores increased two points, from 248 to 250, on a scale of 100 to 400. Under a new scoring mechanism used last year, 250 is the statewide median for third-graders. There were no comparison scores for written language and mathematics because those tests were instituted only last year.

Sixth-graders increased in reading from 66.8 percent correct answers to 67.5 percent; from 64.6 percent to 65.4 percent in written language; 64.5 percent to 64.9 percent in spelling; and 59 percent to 59.8 percent in math.

State officials said comparisons of California student scores to so-called national norms are difficult to make and depend on the type of test used. Generally, they said third- and sixth-graders are above the national average in most standard tests.

"Special equating studies" conducted by the department placed median third-graders at the 58th percentile in reading nationally, 53 in written language and 51 in math. For sixth-graders, those percentiles were 55 for math, 53 for written expression and 56 in reading. (Those percentile ranks are based on 50 percent as a national average and should not be directly equated with the percentage of correct answers on the

state achievement test scores.)

Students who speak fluent Japanese or Chinese as well as fluent English scored higher than any other group. Girls scored higher in reading than boys, and boys higher than girls in math — although girls "made considerable progress in closing the gap at grade 12." Students who spoke "limited English" scored "substantially lower" than any other group.

Riles cited a "direct relationship" between test scores and parental occupational and educational levels. The higher the parents' occupations and educations, the higher the students' scores, he said. But he said the gap is closing between the scores of students from lower economic levels and those of their classmates in higher economic strata.

Riles' office and an advisory committee that studied the test results recommended "a wide range of student reading" to increase 12th-graders' vocabulary and comprehension. They said high school seniors had serious problems with vocabulary and sentence construction, often not knowing the definitions of common words.

"They continue to prefer awkward, wordy and choppy sentences to direct, concise statements," Riles said.

Noting that California high school students take far fewer math courses than students in other states, the committee also urged counselors and teachers to encourage students — particularly junior high school girls — to take more math.

See READING, Page B2