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Life story: Daniel Jones was born with right-side cerebral palsy and couldn't use his right arm at all, but he constantly learned to do things no one thought he could.



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21 Aug 05

21, 2005

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State shrinks achievement gap

Latino, Native American and low-income students' gains put them closer to their white and middle-income peers

By BETSY HAMMOND
THE OREGONIAN

Oregon schools made record progress this year in raising the achievement of minority and low-income students, an analysis of state test

scores by The Oregonian shows. Passing rates among white students went up in every grade in reading and math. But the scores of Latino, Native American and low-income students shot up dramatically at most grade levels, putting those students closer to matching the attainment of white and middle-income students. Passing rates for Oregon's Latino fifth-graders, for instance, soared by 9 percentage points in math and 8 percentage points in reading over 2004. "Now people realize that it is possible

— you can close the achievement gap," says Eduardo Angulo, chairman of the Salem-Keizer Coalition for Equality, which has championed the cause of minority and low-income students. Among students in elementary and middle school, African Americans, special education students and students with limited English proficiency also notched increases this year — bigger than students overall though not as big as the other groups. High school remains a trouble spot, however. The gap remains wide be-

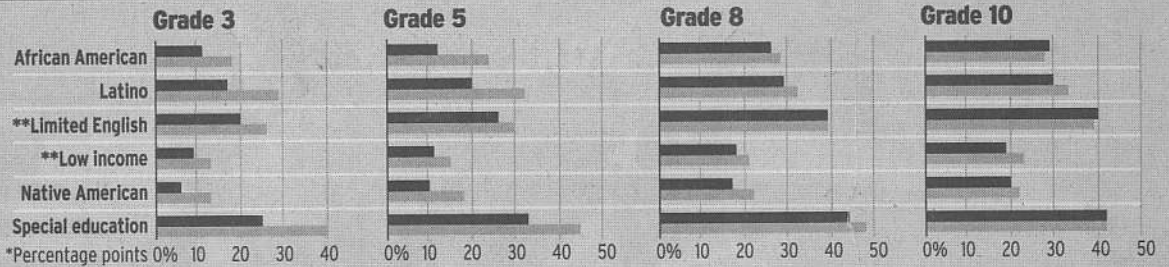
tween minority and white achievement. "We must tackle the low student achievement in middle school and high school with a sense of urgency," said state Schools Superintendent Susan Castillo. "Our approach must be grounded in the belief that all kids can reach high levels of achievement." Angulo and others credit the sharp improvement to the federal No Child Left Behind law, which for the first time holds Oregon schools accountable for Please see **ACHIEVEMENT**, Page C2

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REDUCING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

■ 2005 GAP ■ 2002 GAP

The bars show how big the gap is in combined reading and math scores between white middle-income students and other students. Example: Native American third-graders were 13 percentage points behind white third-graders in 2002, but only 6 percent this year.



*Percentage points based on an average of math and reading scores

** Figures from 2004; not available from previous years

Source: Oregon Department of Education

ERIC BAKER/THE OREGONIAN

Achievement: Expectations, scores linked, advocate says

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the performance of disabled, low-income, minority and limited-English students. Previous ratings were based on schoolwide averages, which could mask low scores among individual students.

As a result, schools have paid more attention to students of color, with disabilities and those learning English as a second language.

Angulo said schools raised expectations for those students, assigned them more skilled teachers and focused on improved teaching of reading, writing and math. Test scores show how these strategies have paid off, he said.

Susan Enfield, director of teaching and learning for Portland Public Schools, said educators were motivated to avoid bad ratings under No Child Left Behind — but more so to see every child in their charge succeed.

Portland educators ranked closing the achievement gap as their No. 1 priority before the federal law was drafted, she noted, and improvements this year follow years of classroom work.

Castillo, Oregon's first statewide Latina elected official, named closing the achievement gap a top priority before she took office in 2003, and she has a team of educators and advocates to advise her on strategies to do so.

Problems remain

Even with this year's scores, a wide gulf remains — especially after students leave elementary school. For instance, passing rates for Latino eighth-graders remain 30 percentage points lower than their white peers.

schools, got low marks. That prompted many schools to put more energy into raising achievement among historically low-scoring groups.

"When you start holding schools and systems accountable for the achievement of all kids, especially the lowest performers, you tend to see more focus, more attention, to what these kids need, and you start to see it pay off in the test scores," Hall said.

In the past four years, Oregon schools have reduced the gap in passing rates for whites and minorities by about one-third in elementary schools and by more than 10 percent in middle schools. The gap between African American fifth-graders' achievement and white fifth-graders' achievement has been halved since 2002.

Portland schools, which enroll half of Oregon's African American students, took new steps this year to make clear that students in every school are expected to be taught to master the same rigorous grade-level material, Enfield said.

Every middle school teacher and principal attended a day-long meeting during which expert teachers went over the academic standards for each grade and gave tips on what to teach to help students pass state tests.

"We wanted to ensure that everyone in every corner of our district is holding students to the same expectations," Enfield said.

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Native American students posted particularly sharp increases this year.

Nichole Maher, executive director of the Native American Youth and Family Center of Portland, which provides tutoring, in-school support and other academic help to more than 700 Native American students in Multnomah County, said programs such as hers deserve more credit for the improvements than do schools. Multnomah County redirected its funding for children's programming to focus more intently on the neediest children. That translated into more support for Native American students, Maher said.

Angulo, who formed his group

six years ago in part to help close the achievement gap, was ecstatic about the big gains this year.

"These numbers show that for the first time in a long, long time, Oregon school administrators and teachers and staff are realizing every child can do it, if the schools pay attention and try. This will help not only those families and those students, but our whole economy. Corporations will want to come here when they see this quality of education that Oregon shows.

"Now," he said, "we just have to keep this up."

Betsy Hammond: 503-294-7623;
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Daria Hall is senior policy analyst for the Education Trust, a national nonprofit group that pushes for improved education for low-income and minority students. Her group helped shape the No Child Left Behind law, and she said it has played a major role in raising achievement among disadvantaged students in Oregon and other states.

No Child Left Behind ratings for Oregon schools were first issued in summer 2003. Nearly 400 schools, including half the state's high

every school are expected to be taught to master the same rigorous grade-level material, Enfield said.

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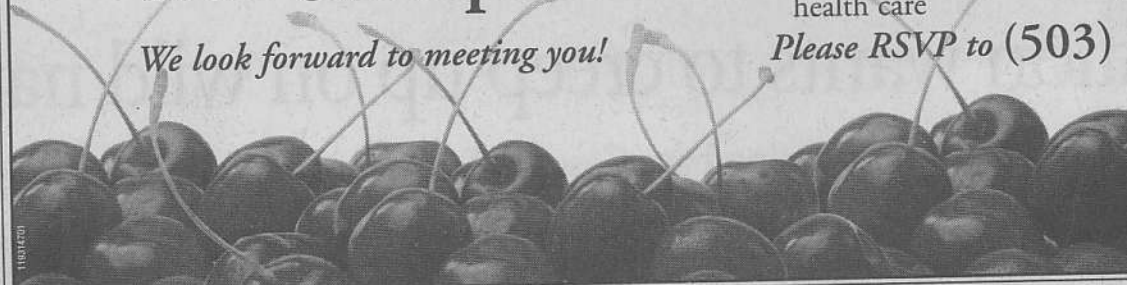
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