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## **Failure Rate on Math Test Up 50 Percent in County**

***Almost one-fourth of black students who had the credits to graduate are stopped by an exam.***

By Lisa Kim Bach

Nearly 9 percent of Clark County high school seniors who completed their coursework failed the math portion of this year's state graduation exam, including almost one in four black students.

In a report released Friday, the Clark County School District said 730 credit-sufficient seniors in the Class of 2000 failed to earn the minimum score of 64 on the test, a 50 percent increase over the 484 seniors who didn't earn math proficiency in 1998-99, when the passing score was set at 61.

Passing the three-part Nevada High School Proficiency Exam -- which also covers reading and writing -- is a requirement for earning a high school diploma in Nevada.

Black students are having the most difficult time. The failure rate for black students is the highest among ethnic groups, at 22.8 percent. That's nearly five times greater than the percentage of white students who failed the math test and four times the percentage of Asian students who flunked. Hispanic students also have difficulty with the math test -- 15.4 percent of those tested were unable to show mastery.

"This tells me that, one, we need to get kids started in math earlier," Superintendent Carlos Garcia said. "And two, we need to start delivering it in a way that kids understand."

The racial divide in achievement concerns Garcia, who has asked for an analysis of courses taken by students who failed the math section. He wants to offer challenging math earlier, in the middle grades, to better prepare students for high school.

"Less than 10 percent of the kids in this district are taking algebra in eighth grade," Garcia said. "We need to mandate that coursework in the seventh and eighth grades."

The report released Friday is a summary of the final results of proficiency testing given in 1999-2000. Overall, 8,317 seniors who earned the credits needed for graduation took the proficiency test in Clark County last year. In reading, 97.4 percent were able to pass, earning at or above the new passing score of 71. That's a slight increase from 1999, when 96.7 percent of seniors scored at or above the required passing score of 70.

Nearly all seniors -- 98.5 percent -- were proficient on the writing test. That's also an increase over 1999, when 98 percent of credit-sufficient seniors passed the test. The writing test is graded on a scale of 1 to 6, with a 3.5 needed to pass. Statewide averages are not yet available from the Nevada Department of Education.

Patricia Cunningham, who leads the Alliance for Social Justice, is a longtime critic of Nevada's high school testing system and is disturbed by this year's results. The gap in ethnic achievement needs to be closed, she said. Cunningham said the district needs to make sure that all students have equal access to high-level classes that teach the skills measured by the math proficiency. She does not believe that is always the case now.

"I think there is a direct correlation between the failure rates and the way students are referred to coursework," said Cunningham, who has been outspoken on the new proficiency test since 1998, when the test content was revised and the passing standard was raised for students.

Cunningham said state politicians rushed into the implementation of the new proficiency test. She called current student failure rates predictable.

"You don't let the children fail and then go back and figure out why," Cunningham said.

The district plans to approach the Legislature with proposals for additional tutorial programs. District Test Director Judy Costa said that more effort also will be placed on having students take part in existing remediation programs. Attendance at those sessions was lower this year than in 1999.

"I do believe that the children who went to the remediation sessions did pass at a higher rate than those who didn't," Costa said.