

Grades Rise, but Reading Skills

By DIANA JEAN SCHEMO

WASHINGTON, Feb. 22 — High school students nationwide are taking seemingly tougher courses and earning better grades, but their reading skills are not improving through the effort, according to two federal reports released here Thursday that cite grade inflation as a possible explanation.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, an exam commonly known as the nation's report card, found that the reading skills of 12th graders tested in 2005 were significantly worse than those of students in 1992, when a comparable test was first given, and essentially flat since students previously took the exam in 2002.

The test results also showed that the overwhelming majority of high school seniors have not fully mastered high-school-level math.

At the same time, however, grade-point averages have risen nationwide, according to a separate survey by the National Assessment, of the transcripts of 26,000 students, which compared them with a study of students' coursework in 1990.

"There's a disconnect between what we want and expect our 12th graders to know and do, and what our schools are actually delivering through instruction in the classroom," David W. Gordon, the superintendent of schools in Sacramento, said at a news conference announcing the results.

The reports offered several rationales for the disparity between rising grade-point averages and tougher coursework on the one hand and stagnant reading scores on the other, including "grade inflation, changes in grading standards" or the possibility that student grades were being increasingly affected by things like classroom participation or extra assignments.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress is considered the

because it is the only test taken all across the country. The test of 12th-grade achievement was given to a representative sample of 21,000 high school seniors attending 900 public and private schools from January to March 2005.

It showed that the share of 12th-grade students lacking even basic high school reading skills — meaning they could not, for example, extract data about train fares at different times of day from a brochure — rose to 27 percent from 20 percent in 1992.

The share of students proficient in reading dropped to 35 percent from 40 percent in 1992. At the same time, the gap between boys and girls grew, with girls' reading skills more than a

Most seniors have still not mastered high school math.

year ahead those of boys.

In math, only 23 percent of all 12th graders were proficient, but the exam has been revamped, so the results could not be compared with those from earlier years, officials said. The new test has fewer questions requiring arithmetic and more using algebra and geometry. Some 39 percent of 12th graders lacked even basic high school math skills.

These results came about even though the separate study of transcripts showed that 12th graders in 2005 averaged 360 more hours of classroom instruction during their high school years than students had in 1990.

Their overall grade-point average was 2.98 — just shy of a B. That was one-third of a letter grade higher than in 1990. The share of students taking a standard curriculum or bet-

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