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Schools Cut Back Subjects to Push Reading and Math

By [SAM DILLON](#)

SACRAMENTO — Thousands of schools across the nation are responding to the reading and math testing requirements laid out in No Child Left Behind, President Bush's signature education law, by reducing class time spent on other subjects and, for some low-proficiency students, eliminating it.

Schools from Vermont to California are increasing — in some cases tripling — the class time that low-proficiency students spend on reading and math, mainly because the federal law, signed in 2002, requires annual exams only in those subjects and punishes schools that fall short of rising benchmarks.

The changes appear to principally affect schools and students who test below grade level.

The intense focus on the two basic skills is a sea change in American instructional practice, with many schools that once offered rich curriculums now systematically trimming courses like social studies, science and art. A nationwide survey by a nonpartisan group that is to be made public on March 28 indicates that the practice, known as narrowing the curriculum, has become standard procedure in many communities.

The survey, by the Center on Education Policy, found that since the passage of the federal law, 71 percent of the nation's 15,000 school districts had reduced the hours of instructional time spent on history, music and other subjects to open up more time for reading and math. The center is an independent group that has made a thorough study of the new act and has published a detailed yearly report on the implementation of the law in dozens of districts.

"Narrowing the curriculum has clearly become a nationwide pattern," said Jack Jennings, the president of the center, which is based in Washington.

At [Martin Luther King Jr. Junior High School](#) in Sacramento, about 150 of the school's 885 students spend five of their six class periods on math, reading and gym, leaving only one 55-minute period for all other subjects.

About 125 of the school's lowest-performing students are barred from taking anything except math, reading and gym, a measure that Samuel Harris, a former lieutenant colonel in the Army who is the school's principal, said was draconian but necessary. "When you look at a kid and you know he can't read, that's a tough call you've got to make," Mr. Harris said.

The increasing focus on two basic subjects has divided the nation's educational establishment. Some authorities, including Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, say the federal law's focus on basic skills is raising achievement in thousands of low-performing schools. Other experts warn that by reducing the academic menu to steak and potatoes, schools risk giving bored teenagers the message that school means repetition and drilling.

"Only two subjects? What a sadness," said Thomas Sobol, an education professor at [Columbia](#) Teachers College and a former New York State education commissioner. "That's like a violin student who's only permitted to play scales, nothing else, day after day, scales, scales, scales. They'd lose their zest for music."

But officials in Cuero, Tex., have adopted an intensive approach and said it was helping them meet the federal requirements. They have doubled the time that all sixth graders and some seventh and eighth graders devote to reading and math, and have reduced it for other subjects.

"When you only have so many hours per day and you're behind in some area that's being hammered on, you have to work on that," said Henry Lind, the schools superintendent. "It's like basketball. If you can't make layups, then you've got to work on layups."

Chad Colby, a spokesman for the federal Department of Education, said the department neither endorsed nor criticized schools that concentrated instructional time on math and reading as they sought to meet the test benchmarks laid out in the federal law's accountability system, known as adequate yearly progress.

"We don't choose the curriculum," Mr. Colby said. "That's a decision that local leaders have to make. But for every school you point to, I can show you five other schools across the country where students are still taking a well-rounded curriculum and are still making adequate yearly progress. I don't think it's unreasonable to ask our schools to get kids proficient at grade level in reading and math."

Since America's public schools began taking shape in the early 1800's, shifting fashions have repeatedly reworked the curriculum. Courses like woodworking and sewing joined the three R's. After World War I, vocational courses, languages and other subjects broadened the instructional menu into a smorgasbord.

A federal law passed after the Russian launching of Sputnik in 1957 spurred a renewed emphasis on science and math, and a 1975 law that guaranteed educational rights for the disabled also provoked sweeping change, said William Reese, a professor at the University of Wisconsin and author of "America's Public Schools: From the Common School to No Child Left Behind." But the education law has leveraged one of the most abrupt instructional shifts, he said.

"Because of its emphasis on testing and accountability in particular subjects, it apparently forces some school districts down narrow intellectual paths," Dr. Reese said. "If a subject is not tested, why teach it?"

The shift has been felt in the labor market, heightening demand for math teachers and forcing educators in subjects like art and foreign languages to search longer for work, leaders of teachers groups said.

The survey that is coming out this week looks at 299 school districts in 50 states. It was conducted as part of a four-year study of No Child Left Behind and appears to be the most systematic effort to track the law's footprints through the classroom, although other authorities had warned of its effect on teaching practices.

The historian David McCullough told a Senate Committee last June that because of the law, "history is being put on the back burner or taken off the stove altogether in many or most schools, in favor of math and reading."

The report says that at districts in Colorado, Texas, Vermont, California, Nebraska and elsewhere, math

and reading are squeezing other subjects. At one district cited, the Bayonne City Schools in New Jersey, low-performing ninth graders will be barred from taking Spanish, music or any other elective next fall so they can take extra periods of math and reading, said Ellen O'Connor, an assistant superintendent.

"We're using that as a motivation," Dr. O'Connor said. "We're hoping they'll concentrate on their math and reading so they can again participate in some course they love."

At King Junior High, in a poor neighborhood in Sacramento a few miles from a decommissioned Air Force base, the intensive reading and math classes have raised test scores for several years running. That has helped Larry Buchanan, the superintendent of the Grant Joint Union High School District, which oversees the school, to be selected by an administrators' group as California's 2005 superintendent of the year.

But in spite of the progress, the school's scores on California state exams, used for compliance with the federal law, are increasing not nearly fast enough to allow the school to keep up with the rising test benchmarks. On the math exams administered last spring, for instance, 17.4 percent of students scored at the proficient level or above, and on the reading exams, only 14.9 percent.

With scores still so low, Mr. Harris, the school's principal, and Mr. Buchanan said they had little alternative but to continue remedial instruction for the lower-achieving among the school's nearly 900 students.

The students are the sons and daughters of mostly Hispanic, black and Laotian Hmong parents, many of whom work as gardeners, welders and hotel maids or are unemployed. The district administers frequent diagnostic tests so that teachers can carefully calibrate lessons to students' needs.

Rubén Jimenez, a seventh grader whose father is a construction laborer, has a schedule typical of many students at the school, with six class periods a day, not counting lunch.

Rubén studies English for the first three periods, and pre-algebra and math during the fourth and fifth. His sixth period is gym. How does he enjoy taking only reading and math, a recent visitor asked.

"I don't like history or science anyway," Rubén said. But a moment later, perhaps recalling something exciting he had heard about lab science, he sounded ambivalent.

"It'd be fun to dissect something," he said.

Martín Lara, Rubén's teacher, said the intense focus on math was paying off because his math skills were solidifying. Rubén said math has become his favorite subject.

But other students, like Paris Smith, an eighth grader, were less enthusiastic. Last semester, Paris failed one of the two math classes he takes, back to back, each morning.

"I hate having two math classes in a row," Paris said. "Two hours of math is too much. I can't concentrate that long."

Donna Simmons, his mother, said Mr. Lara seemed to be working hard to help Paris understand math.

"The school cares," Ms. Simmons said. "The faculty cares. I want him to keep trying."

Sydney Smith, a vice principal who oversees instruction at the school, said she had heard only minimal grumbling from students excluded from electives.

"I've only had about two students come to my office and say: 'What in the world? I'm just taking two courses?' " Ms. Smith said. "So most students are not complaining about being miserable."

But Lorie Turner, who teaches English to some pupils for three consecutive periods and to others for two periods each day, said she used some students' frustration to persuade them to try for higher scores on the annual exams administered under California's Standardized Testing and Reporting program, known as Star.

"I have some little girls who are dying to get out of this class and get into a mainstream class," Ms. Turner said. "But I tell them the only way out is to do better on that Star test."