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At Struggling School, Pride Displaces Failure

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[NEWARK](#)

WHEN the first round of state test results for the Newton Street School came back in late June, the teachers double-checked the numbers, then triple-checked. No mistake: The scores were up.

Relief turned to satisfaction that Newton was not just another failing school with low test scores. This time, nearly 80 percent of its fourth graders had passed math, 69 percent language arts, and 77 percent science, all double-digit increases from the previous year, and one of the biggest overall gains in the Newark school system. The third-grade scores also rose, with 56 percent passing math and 67 percent language arts (there is no third-grade science test).

Buried beneath the numbers were hard-won victories by students like Hakim McKenzie, 10, who repeated third grade this year. Hakim failed the math test last year because he did not understand the questions, stumped by words like “estimate” and “reduce.” This year, he not only passed math but also scored high enough to earn an “advanced proficient” designation.

“It’s the first thing I’ve been good at,” said Hakim, a shy boy with a toothy grin who has earned the nickname Little Teacher among his classmates because he helps them with math homework. “My friends say, ‘How did you get that good in math?’ I say that I use books and my teacher, Mr. Kilgore, helps me. I feel like I’ve achieved something really good.”

The rising test scores highlight a year of ambitious change at Newton that has succeeded in restoring pride and hope to a beleaguered school, one that had been worn down by academic setbacks and buffeted by street violence just outside its doors. Newton, with 500 students in prekindergarten through eighth grade, has faced the increasing likelihood of being shut down or overhauled after failing to meet federal testing benchmarks under the [No Child Left Behind Act](#) for seven consecutive years.

Whether this is the year that Newton finally passes will not be known until August, when the results for grades five through eight of the all-important state test, called the NJ ASK, will be released. But there are still many hurdles ahead. Test scores typically drop in the middle grades, and could wipe out gains among third and fourth graders. Moreover, even with the rising scores in those grades, a sizable number of Newton students have still not mastered minimum basic skills.

On top of that, the State Board of Education last week decided to raise the bar on what it will consider a

passing score — or the proficient ranking — on the tests for fifth through eighth graders taken in the spring.

For now, though, Newton pupils and teachers are savoring their moment. “I’m happy with the results, but I’m looking for greater results,” said Willie Thomas, 65, the principal for more than three decades. “It feels good when people say, ‘Did you see Newton’s scores?’ It feels good and it also feels strange.”

As the school year wound down last month, Newton’s third and fourth graders were feted like Olympians. They were applauded at a school assembly, presented with certificates— even those who did not pass received a certificate for effort — and excused from class for a “mini-field day” of relay races and games on the playground. During a celebration in the cafeteria, teachers passed out juice boxes and cut into two Costco sheet cakes decorated with a trophy and a “#1.”

“We are almost at 100 percent,” one fourth-grade teacher told the 60 or so students gathered around the metal picnic tables. “You all need to really scream about that because I’m so excited.”

The students roared back at her, their high-pitched voices reverberating down the hall.

The Newton experiment began last September after Mr. Thomas, under pressure from the lagging test scores, struck a partnership with the influential Newark Teachers Union and [Seton Hall University](#) to remake the school. Although the state has oversight of the Newark school district, Newton was given leeway to form a governance committee consisting of representatives of the teachers’ union and Seton Hall, along with district and state education officials, to approve daily operations ranging from intercom repairs to academic policies and teacher hiring.

The so-called new Newton, which has been touted as a model for education reform, not only raised the school’s profile within the district but also freed it from the usual bureaucracy and paperwork that dictate school life, Newton teachers and administrators said. With the support of the union, Newton was able to replace 6 of its 44 teachers, a turnaround for a place that had once been known as a “training ground,” of sorts, for teachers who failed in other schools. It also extended the school day by an hour for the middle grades.

Seton Hall’s education professors took over much of the staff development, scheduling workshops on data analysis and coaching newer teachers in their classrooms. They equipped every Newton faculty member with a free I.B.M. laptop, and handed out basketballs and tickets to Seton Hall’s home games as an incentive for students and their parents. About 50 Seton Hall undergraduates came to Newton last fall to tutor students.

“I didn’t feel alone,” said Kevin Kilgore, 23, a third-grade math teacher who just finished his first year at Newton. “Teaching can be a very lonely profession. When you’re in a classroom, you’re the only adult. Because of this alliance, I knew there were many people, many adults involved.”

Before the state test, Mr. Kilgore and the other teachers chipped in money to buy T-shirts for every third and fourth grader; the shirts are in blue and yellow, the school’s colors, and proclaim “Failure is NOT an option” above a pencil, paper and alarm clock.

Mr. Kilgore said that he prepared his third graders by slipping them fourth-grade math problems when they were not looking. He showed them complex fractions when they only needed to know simple ones. In geometry, he did not stop with calculating the perimeter of squares and triangles but moved right on to trapezoids. He posted their best work on a bulletin board in his classroom, labeled the “Wall of Fame.”

His plan worked, mostly. Eleven of his students scored at least 250 out of a possible 300 points in math, reaching the advanced proficient level. Another 12 passed with “proficient” scores between 200 and 249. Nine failed with scores below 200, including Hakim’s younger sister, Tamia, 9, who is also in the third grade.

“I felt mad because every time we have a test, Hakim always passes,” said Tamia, who vowed to work harder to catch up to him.

Hakim said he spent an hour every day on math, using only the first 5 minutes or so for homework. The rest of the time he made up his own equations, and solved them, just because he could. Hakim’s math grade rose to a B, and Mr. Kilgore said it might even have been an A if he were not such a tough grader.

Hakim, the second oldest of five children, said his mother wants him to parlay his math skills into a good job someday, maybe as a cashier. Hakim carries a Spider-Man notebook filled with sketches and aspires instead to be an artist. He jokes that he will be able to calculate the cost of his paints and brushes.

He is determined to reach advanced proficient again on next year’s test. His reward? His mother has promised that he could have his own room.

The Newton partnership has reinvigorated one of the oldest schools in Newark, and seems to be accomplishing what many other educators have tried and failed to do. But some teachers noted that this year’s rise in test scores also reflected changes already well under way in their classrooms. Newton has focused in the past few years on developing literacy skills at younger ages. Now, even first graders learn to write poems, and in May, one class staged a “poetry cafe,” with juice and fresh roses on the desktops.

“You’ve got to push — and whether it comes from the new Newton or the old Newton — when it’s desperation time, everyone pitches in,” said Jerome Hancock, 35, a math teacher at Newton for the past decade. He said that anxiety over the test scores had spurred teachers to become more open-minded about trying new things, and forced them to work harder to reach students. “All of us are making sandbags to protect us from the flood and getting washed out.”

The importance of doing well on “the Test” — as it is referred to here — has become ingrained in the students, too. Lindsay Cullinan, 25, a fourth-grade teacher, said that one girl was so self-conscious about her score that she asked for it to be whispered in her ear (Ms. Cullinan usually shows students their score on a piece of paper). Another pupil, upon learning that he had scored advanced proficient in math and science, celebrated with a moon walk across the classroom.

All but 12 of Newton’s 39 fourth graders passed language arts this year. Several of those who did not have been referred for special education instruction, and three will repeat the grade next year with Ms. Cullinan.

“They came in three years behind and they made a year-and-a-half of progress, but they’re still behind,” she said. “There was no way they were going to pass that test.”

Ernest Whitaker, 46, a popular science teacher often trailed by students, added that reaching the marginal students will become easier next year as returning teachers get to know them even better, and vice versa. “You need a rapport to get through, or they tell you, ‘I’m not feeling you, Mr. Whitaker,’” he said. “They have to feel that you’re here for them, not for a paycheck, and they know.”

Toni Ryan, mother of Hakim and Tamia, said that her children had already made more progress this year than she had expected because of the personal attention showered on them. “I’ve seen the work that’s been done this year,” said Ms. Ryan, 31, a homemaker. “There’s a big difference.”

But several parents said that the changes have not gone far enough. Michael Easter said that his stepdaughter, Davione Peay, a second grader, complains that she still does not get enough help from her teachers. Mr. Easter, 38, a forklift operator, also expressed worries about her safety as a fight broke out in front of the school. “I think things still need to improve,” said Mr. Easter, who is considering moving Davione to a charter school.

On July 7, less than two weeks after the last day of school, Newton’s doors reopened for summer classes. Students are getting a head start on the next grade by working with their new teachers on language arts and math.

More than 100 children signed up for the summer program, which is free to any Newton student. The parent-teacher organization promoted the extra classes by handing out fliers to students. When that did not work, it appealed directly to parents attending an end-of-year musical revue. Forty families signed up during intermission.

The parent organization, which was revived last fall, has already printed back-to-school banners for September. Among the new initiatives for the coming school year will be a monthly Disney movie night in the school auditorium, with free hot dogs, popcorn and soda, for students who make the honor roll or even just show up for class on time. On any given day, about 10 percent of Newton students drift in after the 8:25 a.m. start, often with no excuse other than that they overslept.

Newton has also adopted a new parental-involvement policy that calls for parents to pledge up to one hour a day at the school, helping out in classes or at after-hours events, in return for a chance to win raffle prizes like a flat-screen television or a microwave. “To become involved and stay involved, that’s the new policy,” said Nicole Singletary, 30, a kindergarten teacher’s aide who is the parent-teacher organization president. “We’re battling seven years of not saying anything and not having our voices heard.”

Mr. Thomas, the principal, said that activism has expanded beyond the parents to the teachers and students and, more than anything else, is responsible for driving the improvements in the classroom. “When you start taking ownership, you’re going to make it work because it’s part of you,” he said.

At his request, Mr. Thomas is leaving Newton this summer to spend his last year before retirement helping to train administrators in the district. More than 20 people applied to become the next principal. “This is my home,” Mr. Thomas said, adding that he will be back to check on the school’s progress in the fall. “I’m not going to let all the things I’ve built go down the street.”

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