

# Some townships show ISTEP gains despite challenges of growing poverty

*Only two township districts showed drops in scores, with Warren Township down by 1.1 percentage points and Lawrence Township down by 0.4.*

by Shaina Cavazos on August 5, 2014



PHOTO: Allen Underwood, Courtesy of Wayne Township Schools

**A teacher helps a student during classroom instruction at McClelland Elementary School. McClelland had one of the highest ISTEP gains in the county with an increase of 19 percentage points.**

With a little more than a quarter of their schools even ranking in the top half statewide when it comes to passing ISTEP, Marion County townships struggled this year.

But in a few of them — especially Pike and Wayne townships — the percentage of students passing ISTEP is growing quickly, even as the families the schools serve have grown considerably poorer.

For Pike Township, there's a new focus on providing a "safety net" for kids who might otherwise fall through the cracks — different learning options and extra supports outside the classroom. In Wayne, a key strategy has been to pay close attention to teaching methods in the classroom and reinforcing what works best.

Wayne Township had the county's biggest gain on ISTEP, up 5.8 percentage points with 64.4 percent passing both math and English in 2013-14, according to data released today by the Indiana Department of Education.

Over a longer time period, five years, Pike Township leads the county with a gain of 11.3 points.

In fact, most of the county's school districts have made strong gains over the past five years. Wayne Township gained 8.7 points and IPS is up 8.2 points, while Lawrence Township (8.2 points), and Franklin Township (7.3 points) also gained at least seven points over that time.

No Marion County district has lost ground over five years but the smallest gain over five years was Warren Township, which gained just 1.5 points.

**Marion County School districts ISTEP passing rate trends**

Corp Name	Both Math and English Percent Passed 2014	Both Math and English Percent Passed 2013	Both Math and English Percent Passed 2012	Both Math and English Percent Passed 2011	Both Math and English Percent Passed 2010	1 year change	5 year change
Decatur Township	67.2%	66.8%	64.4%	64.8%	62.7%	0.4%	4.5%
Franklin Township	82.8%	81.8%	81.5%	78.6%	75.5%	0.9%	7.3%
Lawrence Township	66.8%	67.1%	63.2%	60.7%	58.6%	-0.4%	8.2%
Perry Township	72.2%	70.9%	71.4%	73.1%	69.6%	1.3%	2.6%
Pike Township	66.7%	64.9%	60.4%	57.1%	55.4%	1.9%	11.3%
Warren Township	64.2%	65.3%	65.2%	62.4%	62.6%	-1.1%	1.5%
Washington Township	71.1%	69.3%	65.7%	68.5%	65.7%	1.8%	5.4%
Wayne Township	64.4%	58.7%	59.0%	56.6%	55.8%	5.8%	8.7%
Beech Grove	75.1%	72.2%	73.7%	72.5%	72.1%	2.9%	3.0%
Indianapolis Public Schools	51.6%	51.3%	48.3%	44.6%	43.0%	0.2%	8.5%
Speedway	80.4%	78.4%	82.2%	79.4%	75.7%	1.9%	4.7%

**2013-14 ISTEP scores by township over the past five years**

For Pike and Wayne, a surge in poverty has made their jobs harder, but also presented opportunities to think differently about how they serve their students.

In Pike, students who come from families poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch jumped to 64 percent last year from 40 percent in 2007. For a family of four, that means annual income is less than \$43,500.

Pike has responded to that trend by thinking outside the classroom, not just focusing on instruction.

The district has implemented “safety net” programs, as Pike Township Superintendent Nate Jones calls them, which include after-school tutoring and mentoring programs.

Pike has also tried to offer new types of learning. Some kids fit better, Jones said, in alternative programs with more classroom structure. Weekend learning opportunities work well for others.

The district also recently added a focus on science, technology, engineering and math with a goal of helping students compete for jobs.

“I will not say that poverty does not negatively impact student achievement,” he said. “But our whole philosophy has been turnaround, especially in the last five or six years. Students that come to us, we’re going to work with them where they’re at.”

In Wayne Township, Superintendent Jeff Butts said there is a new focus on encouraging quality teaching.

It began with honest discussions about what was, and was not, working, with teachers leading the discussions around how they are evaluated. Administrators started visiting classrooms more often, suggesting improvements and trying to respond more quickly and with specific advice.

“You have to make it comfortable enough that it’s not punitive,” Butts said. “It’s not about somebody being in trouble, it’s about having really a safe environment to say, ‘I missed something, in how I taught this or how I proceeded through this unit, and I know I can do something different to make a bigger impact on my children. What does that look like?’”

Two Wayne Township schools were ranked among the top 30 in the state for the biggest gains over last year: McClelland Elementary School (up 19 points) and North Wayne Elementary School (up 15 points).

The district redesigned its curriculum and put a stronger focus studying test scores and using what was learned to tailor instruction. Teachers were able to see where test scores were growing and where they were falling short. That led to conversations about what could be done differently.

At McClelland, Butts also also praised Principal Jennifer Nichols’ leadership.

“It makes a difference when you have a strong principal, and she’s a strong principal,” Butts said.

Even with township schools making gains, the county is struggling.

Only three Marion County districts saw more than one in 10 of their schools ranked in the top quarter of the state for ISTEP passing rate: Franklin (38 percent), Speedway (20 percent) and Washington (10 percent).

Franklin, the county's top scoring district for several years, has an advantage: it has the fewest poor students in the county at 37.9 percent. This year, it again had the highest passing rate with 82.8 percent passing, up about one point from last year.

Franklin Township Superintendent Flora Reichanadter said her district has good strategies — for example, the schools decreed a 90-minute uninterrupted block of reading time for elementary school kids and dedicated time for extra help or trying more challenging work for middle school students.

But there was a problem: those times were constantly being interrupted.

"At the elementary level, we already had the time set aside," she said. "We were providing a lot of individual help but we weren't providing it at the same intensity that our lowest performing kids needed."

Most of the county isn't seeing as many schools succeed.

A majority of schools fall in the bottom 25 percent for percent passing ISTEP in four districts: IPS (83 percent), Lawrence (62 percent), Wayne (60 percent) and Warren (53 percent).

That was also the story for the the county as a whole. A combined 56 percent of 105 traditional public and charter schools ranked in the bottom quarter statewide and just 6 percent in the top quarter.

Warren (down 1.1 points) and Lawrence (down 0.4 points), were the only Marion County districts that saw their passing rates drop.

In Warren Township, Superintendent Dena Cushenberry blamed a "perfect storm" of circumstances for the decline.

The district, she said, has struggled with high staff turnover, new standards, an influx of new students and the extra effort required to operate three programs it promised the U.S. Department of Education it would undertake.

The programs were made possible by a \$28.5 million federal Race To The Top grant. They required an overhaul of tests the district used to gauge college and career readiness, an effort to personalize each student's learning and an attempt to emphasize a more supportive approach to discipline.

"There was just a lot for us, and a dip like that I really attribute it to just so many initiatives," Cushenberry said. "And it was a point and not significant, but certainly something we're looking at."

Over the last decade, Warren Township gained a reputation for raising test scores, following a

the “eight-step” process, a system of testing, tracking and regrouping of students as their skills improve.

But today, the district still stands 10th out of 11 in Marion County for its ISTEP passing rate, just above IPS. Their experience mirrors the rest of the county: improving but still behind.

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