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At Top Gainer Region 5, Educators Like To 'Think 20 Steps Ahead'

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When Kathleen Cashin arrived at Region 5 two years ago, it had been an educational wasteland for decades. About two-thirds of children in the elementary and middle schools were failing state and city math and English exams. As is still true, about 75% of the students were poor enough to qualify for free and reduced-price lunch and about 80% were black and Hispanic.

These days, Region 5, which straddles eastern Brooklyn and southern Queens, is making substantial progress. This year, a year when the citywide percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards in grades three, five, six, and seven jumped by 14.4 percentage points in English and 7.5 percentage points in math, Region 5 topped every other region.

The proportion of the region's third-, fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-graders meeting standards jumped 16.9 points in English and 9.7 in math.

In a telephone interview yesterday, Ms. Cashin said the unprecedented gains were due to teamwork, targeted professional development, goal-setting, and intense organization.

"We are very well organized," she said. "We think 20 steps ahead. We try to leave nothing to chance. ... The underpinning of everything is to be organized."

She said that means she and her team plan out professional development a year in advance, targeting the different professional needs of teachers. It also means they create "prototypes" for teaching balanced literacy that establish clear expectations.

Ms. Cashin said her region's success goes beyond such specific programs. It has to do with attitude.

"I'm not cautious. I'm not irresponsible, of course. But I go for it because I know the children don't have time to wait," she said. "And then when you



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SKYROCKETING SCORES Seventh-grade students in Latasha Rutledge's classroom at P.S./I.S. 41 in Brooklyn yesterday. The school, part of District 23, saw the largest increase in growth on reading scores, which were released Wednesday.

have the attitude of hope — that you're glad to be with them — that's contagious."

A vice president at Kaplan K12 Learning Services, Seppy Basili, whose company does test-preparation and professional development in every Region 5 school, said what's most impressive about the region is the amount of cooperation.

"The level of teamwork in Region 5 is terrific," he said. "There's a really strong spirit of cooperation and energy and mission. That's very clear to me when I work there. That's something I see that stands out."

The vice chairman of the division of educational leadership, administration, and policy at Fordham University, Matt Bromme, said, "I really think that you have a good group of principals and teachers who work very hard. They've

put in very good test prep programs. And they did what they had to do." Mr. Bromme used to be the superintendent of District 7, one of the three community school districts that make up Region 5.

Principals in the region said the recent progress could be credited to the commitment and cooperation of regional leaders — and also a lot of hard work.

When Myron Rock became principal of P.S./I.S. 41 in Brownsville four years ago, the school was under corrective action, one step worse than failing. Since then, it has made steady upward progress. This year, 63.5% of fourth-graders met or exceeded English standards with scores of 3 and 4. At the fifth-grade level, 48.3% of students scored at levels 3 and 4 on the English exam, up from 31.6% last year. The seventh-graders made an even

greater gain in English. Last year, just 16.4% scored at levels 3 and 4. This year, 36.5% of seventh-graders passed.

Mr. Rock said the improvements were due to a very dedicated group of teachers who worked during free periods, on Saturdays, on vacations, and after school with students who needed extra support. He also attributed the success to Ms. Cashin's support, test preparation from Kaplan, an intensive arts program featuring after-school clubs at which students can learn about dance, theater, and poetry, and an increased focus on writing.

"Writing is a very critical piece to our school's educational process," he said. "Writing allows you to clarify your thinking."

He said average first-grader at his school is writing this year at the level an average fourth-grader was writing four years ago.

Another Region 5 principal, Oswaldo Malave of P.S. 156, said the mayor's plan to hold back fifth-graders who scored at the lowest level on the math or English exams proved to be a "scare tactic" that boosted performance. Last year, 36.5% of his fifth-graders passed the reading exam. This year, a full 59.6% passed. The percent scoring at the lowest level dropped to 6.6% from 20.4%.

"There are too many competing forces out there. There are games, Nintendos, televisions. It competes with instruction," he said. "It's easier for a child to sit and watch television rather than be in Saturday school. I think it's a good thing that we have this incentive of holding them accountable."

Constance Hahn, the principal of P.S. 108, said she's "ecstatic" about the scores. "We have to prepare the children to be successful adults. We have to prepare them to be successful leaders for tomorrow. We had to put an end to people not being able to perform in society," she said. "We tell the children you have to have a plan. Third grade counts. Second grade counts."