

State errors making it harder for Q-C schools to determine NCLB status

By Kristina Gleeson, Staff writer

When business mail lands in a resident's mailbox, spelling errors on names and addresses are common. "Think about (if) every time there's a mistake like that, it could mean the difference between success and failure," East Moline school administrator Doug Whisker said.

This is what some Illinois schools, including Moline, East Moline and Rock Island-Milan, are facing -- except instead of businesses making mailing errors, the Illinois Board of Education made mistakes in school report cards. These errors could determine whether some schools sink or swim.

Districts are struggling to reach what some consider impossibly high academic achievement standards set by the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Failure means serious consequences. Schools whose report cards get a thumbs-down from the state board of education for four or five years could be closed.

The report cards districts recently got from the state told them whether their schools were in the clear or on a warning or watch list.

The state is focusing its energies now on 300-plus schools that would have gotten a thumbs-up report card had it not been for the test participation rates for student subgroups. The law requires schools to test at least 95 percent of students in general and 95 percent of subgroups.

Locally, the Moline School District had this problem with at least one of its schools, Moline superintendent Cal Lee said.

The ISBE "said we didn't (reach adequate yearly progress) for three of our schools and we say we did," Mr. Lee added.

In the other two schools, other numbers indicate they didn't meet standards, but administrators disagree.

Under NCLB, a growing percentage of a school's students must meet or exceed standards on all state tests each year. This year, the act requires at least 40 percent of students to meet or exceed test standards. The number goes up each year. By the end of the 2013-14 school year, 100 percent of students are expected to meet or exceed state test standards.

“We're being very cautious,” Mr. Lee said. “I told the principals -- check the numbers.”

The ISBE gave the Moline district a week to “figure out discrepancies and write them down,” then held a two-hour phone conference to discuss the inaccuracies.

“We're in a wait-and-see stance,” Mr. Lee said. “We're waiting for the state superintendent to issue a statement for what we're going to do.”

The report cards still are expected to be released Friday as planned with a disclaimer that the data is under investigation and “may not be accurate,” Mr. Lee said.

A process for working with the errors likely will be discussed during a Thursday meeting of the state board of education.

Mr. Whisker, East Moline's associate superintendent of curriculum and instruction, said the district also found errors, but none affected whether schools were considered failing.

Two East Moline schools had errors. In one, “we were told we had so many students participate from a certain subgroup on a test. We should have also been told what percentage of those students met or exceeded standards, and that column was blank,” Mr. Whisker said.

The other had the opposite problem. “There was nothing in the column reporting what percentage participated,” he added.

ISBE spokesperson Naomi Greene said discrepancies happen every year and are usually fixed during the year. However, she noted “this is the year that it counts.”

An e-mail the district sent to the state board of education two weeks ago has not been answered, likely due to numerous districts contacting the board. The ISBE is focusing first on those schools that “for the first time are being designated ... (failing) ... and to address those. If their status is not going to change, I don't think there's anything we can do right now,” Ms. Greene said.

The Rock Island-Milan district also saw some errors, which also didn't label a school failing when it was not, assistant superintendent for instruction/school improvement Jay Marino said.

“The data showed that 100 percent of our students took the test,” Mr. Marino said, but then “showed some subgroups that were less than 100 percent that were tested, and that’s mathematically impossible. We have contacted the ISBE.”

This type of error is caused by the misidentifications of specific students in subgroups, Ms. Greene said. “If the school says there’s 40 Hispanics but the test identified 20, there’s 20 unaccounted for, and (the ISBE) didn’t do that.”

This was the first year that participation rates and subgroups have been counted, and the data fields on the spreadsheets of the report cards more than doubled from 5,000 to 11,000, Ms. Greene said.

Schools can pre-order labels with barcodes identifying students, their race, and any subgroup they made be in, such as special education, in January or February. Students also could identify themselves on the tests, leading to possible mis-matches if they didn’t agree with the school’s assessment of their race, for example.

Other schools guided students’ responses to the information identifying themselves, Ms. Greene said.

Bruce Dennison, Regional Superintendent for the Bureau, Henry, & Stark Counties Regional Office of Education, said at least two of the schools in the region discovered some reporting errors. “Our staff continues to work with (schools) and the state agency to provide accurate information,” he said.

“We are going have some problems with this (No Child) legislation in its infancy. The devil is in the details. We are dealing with thousands of pieces of data here.” Those viewing the report cards should remember, he said, that “just because they see something in writing doesn’t mean it’s etched in stone.”

Silvis has not found any errors yet, elementary and junior high school principal Ray Bergles said.

“Knock on wood.”