

Schools in a quandary over when and how to meet new national standards

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By Stephanie Massick
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The U.S. Department of Education said Monday that 9 percent of public schools, including several in the Quad-Cities, have failed to meet national learning standards, making students eligible by federal law to transfer to better schools within their districts.

As a result of low scores on the ISAT, students at three Rock Island schools — Edison Junior High, Grant Intensive Basic School and Hawthorne-Irving Elementary — may have the choice to go to a higher-performing school within the district.

This is the result of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which President George W. Bush signed in January. The law requires that students in schools where test scores have failed to meet state academic standards for two consecutive years be allowed to transfer to another public school.

Rock Island school officials are waiting on the results of the latest ISATs, taken by students in April, to determine if the schools will remain on the academic warning list.

"We're just at kind of a wait-and-see posture," said superintendent David Markward.

If the most recent scores do not change the status of the schools, he's not certain what will happen next. While parents

would have the option of transferring their children to a school that is not on the academic warning list, he said district officials don't know how that would be implemented.

"There have to be considerations for available space, as an example," he said. "We're just unclear as to what our obligation is."

The ISAT scores may not arrive until mid-August, causing another difficulty.

"We have an additional challenge in terms of timing," he said, "because our kids will be here Aug. 6," due to the district's modified year-round calendar.

"It's possible we could be starting school before we have the test results. It's a bit frustrating for us to work our way through and anticipate what could happen," he said, "because we've gotten less-than-concrete answers to some of our questions."

Mr. Markward also expressed some concern about the way schools are evaluated.

"Each state is using a different test to measure whether their students are meeting or exceeding standards ... which seems a little illogical," he said. "That's an indication of legislation getting out in front of the guidelines to implement the provisions of the law."

Some Iowa schools may suffer



David Markward

the same challenges, said Bill Thiessen, Davenport school district's executive director for learning services. Five district schools — Buchanan, Hayes, Madison, Jefferson

Edison and Washington — are on the failing list, but that may be due to out-dated information, he said.

All of the schools showed improvement on their most recent scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, he said. However, "we were told they were not able to use this year's tests."

"If the current 2001-2002 scores had been used," he said, "all five of those buildings (would have shown) improvement."

Davenport district officials don't know how they'll deal with students who want to attend other schools.

"We're still waiting to get from the state clarification of the rules," Mr. Thiessen said. "We're in the process of getting those questions clarified."

A phone call to a U.S. Department of Education representative was not returned Wednesday.

Mr. Markward said districts also are having to adjust to a change in standards.

Prior to this year, a school had to have 50 percent of its students meet or exceed learning standards to be considered successful. Now, he said, "the national legislation has changed that to 40 percent. But not only 40 percent overall, but 40 percent of every subgroup in your student population."

These subgroups, he said, include gender, ethnicity, family income levels and special education.

He added that the national goal is to raise the required number of passing students by 5 percent every year until 2014, at which point "all students in all subgroups must meet the standards."

"It's a very intense goal to meet," said Jay Marino, assistant superintendent of curriculum. "It's a very aggressive goal. Realistic? Yes, I think it is."

He said that, even if the national mandates were lessened, the district's aim still would be 100 percent.

"Our vision in this district is excellence every day. Our core value is continuous improvement. That's what we're about."

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