

# Area schools showing improvement, but still struggling

A majority of schools throughout central Illinois continue to improve in student achievement, but for many those gains are more and more being overshadowed, education officials say.

More than half of some 180 elementary schools and half of 56 high schools throughout central Illinois showed improvement in one or both categories of math or reading, according to school performance data released this week by the Illinois State Board of Education.

Eureka District 140 saw continued improvement that allowed it to be removed from the growing list of districts facing federal sanctions; both Princeton District 115 and Putnam County District 535 also will not advance further in sanctions because they met the rising bar of academic standards.

Despite the many gains, education officials say schools are facing the negative perception that they are not doing their job because of how schools are being assessed.

Several elementary schools, including some across Peoria, Morton, Pekin, Eureka, and Elmwood saw 80 percent of students or more meeting or exceeding academic standards in both math and reading, and yet the schools did not meet federal and state test goals.

At Pekin District 108, the largest elementary school district in the region, eight of the 10 schools posted gains - all 10 have average composite scores above 80 percent - yet three did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress. In fact, such was the case at nearly two dozen schools throughout the region, data shows.

"Crazy, isn't it?" asks Roger Alvey, superintendent at Elmwood District 322. "Try to explain that to the readers, who will see 92.2 percent meeting or exceeding at the elementary school, and we still did not meet AYP in that building."

The problem many schools run into is if there are at least 45 students in a particular category or "subgroup" - such as special education - in a certain grade, that group also must meet the same academic standards as their grade peers. But if the subgroup does not meet the same standards, the entire school "fails."

Elementary school students in grades 3 through 8 are tested on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test; high school juniors take the Prairie State Achievement Exam, of which the ACT test makes up half. Both are taken each spring.

To meet Adequate Yearly Progress requires 77.5 percent of students meeting or exceeding academic standards this year. But that mark is quickly on the rise, from 70 percent last year and up to 85 percent in 2011. By 2014, all students are expected to achieve throughout all schools.

While many school officials agree the tests have prompted more accountability of schools, they are not an accurate gauge of student improvement.

Illustrating the need for some sort of change, 609 high schools of the 665 high schools statewide - or nine out of every 10 - missed the bar this year.

In central Illinois, while about half of 56 high schools showed some improvement either in reading, math or both, only five made AYP. And those five schools only met AYP because they earned enough improvement above the previous year's achievement results.

At the current rate, virtually no high school is likely to meet AYP in 2011, even traditionally high-performing high schools such as Dunlap or Morton, without some marked improvement on scores next year.

"It's a terminal program," IVC District 321 Superintendent Nick Polyak said of the current assessment system. One of the district's elementary and junior high schools each saw positive gains that put them above a composite of 90 percent meeting and exceeding. All schools but the high school managed to make AYP, not uncommon among unit districts statewide.

Regardless of how some the assessments portray their school, officials say they are not giving up.

Allen Johnson, superintendent at Pleasant Valley District 67, where despite more than 70 percent of students hailing from low income homes and 20 percent of students needing some form of special education, the district is meeting AYP.

"We're beating the odds in my opinion," Superintendent Allen Johnson said. "These guys are coming in disadvantaged, they don't have a lot of that school background at an early age - I think we're doing a bang up job, I'm really proud of our staff."

Johnson said that progress comes from a great deal of time working on curriculum, professional development of teachers and tightly coordinating curriculum.

At Peoria District 150, 13 schools improved in both reading and math, one school remained unchanged and six schools declined in both areas compared to last year. Another seven schools showed improvement in one subject but a decline in the other.

That's despite tremendous odds of where nearly three of every four students come from poverty - 10 of the 27 schools tested have low income rates of 90 percent or more - and one in every five students are identified with needing some form of special education.

Districtwide, the percentage of students meeting or exceeding reading standards climbed to 64.9 percent, up 2.1 percentage points from last year. Math was unchanged at 69.9 percent.

This year district officials have moved special education services from one or two centralized locations back into various schools to put those services closer to students.

Even at traditionally high-performing districts, success is not being taken for granted.

Roger Kilpatrick, superintendent at Morton District 709, and Jay Marino, superintendent at Dunlap District 323, both say more resources have been put into eyeing every student's individual performance with more testing and monitoring of progress throughout the year.

"The traditional paradigm has been remediation," Marino said, which requires schools sometimes "to go back and fix," whereas now districts are focusing efforts on intervention programs to identify needs and deficiency as students are learning.

Both also lauded teachers as well as the role parents play in their children's education, saying parental involvement is as necessary as the other initiatives.

At Eureka District 140, the only district in the state to be removed from a state list of districts in federal sanctions, superintendent Randy Crump said they organized curriculum committees throughout the schools in each content area, added time after school for students to receive extra help with homework under the supervision of teachers and provided a host of staff development for teachers.

"We have spent hours and hours discussing how we can do a better job educating our students," Crump said. "The hard work of our staff and students and the parental support we receive are the basic ingredients for our success."

Peoria Heights Grade School managed to post some of the biggest gains in the area and meet AYP, a combined 12.3 percentage point increase, despite a proportionately high number of special education students.

Principal Gene Beltz said the process to initiate change began more than two years ago by identifying students who had the greatest need. Those students were provided additional one-on-one tutoring but they also did something unique.

"We had every child read each question out loud," Beltz said when it came time for students to test. "With a room full of 20 to 25 kids, it's quiet, the teacher is watching, but it's very easy for a student not to be on task."

He said they hired test monitors, certified teachers, who took the students to various spots in the school where they essentially listened.

"There was a cost but when you live and die by those numbers, it's something you've got to do," Beltz said.

Schools that do not meet AYP consecutively for more than two years can face sanctions that grow the longer schools do not meet the standards.

Across the street at Peoria Heights High School, Eric Heath is hesitant about celebrating.

The high school saw an impressive 10.7 percentage-point gain - big improvements in both math and reading - but whether the gains will stick this year is unclear. In fact, the principal said he has quit talking to teachers about test scores related to the PSAE exam a couple years ago.

Don't misunderstand that, he said. "There is a focus to raise achievement and push for more out of students," he says, but rather, it's more a result of the current assessments high schools face.

With only about 50 students in the junior class who are tested, just a few students make a huge difference.

At Midland District 7 in Marshall County, Rolf Sivertsen said the elementary and middle school students continue to perform well - both showing composite scores above 90 percent of meets and exceeds - but said he was disappointed to see math and reading scores at the high school dip in light of recent changes.

"We are not getting the job done and need to make appropriate adjustments to improve instruction to raise student academic performance," Sivertsen said, noting they have adopted a number of plans to move forward.

"It is easy to bash public education and make excuses on why students are not performing to acceptable levels," he said. "In fact, our political leaders and educators to some extent in Illinois and Washington have made a sport of it. In my opinion it takes more courage to provide answers and solutions to benefit our students and society."