

School progress praised

By Kristina Gleeson
Staff writer

ROCK ISLAND—It's the only Rock Island school on the state academic watch list, but those at Tuesday night's meeting at Grant Intensive Basic Elementary School praised the steps the school is taking to improve.

"The most important thing is working to improve the achievement of Grant students regardless of lists and the state," superintendent Dave Markward told the group of about 20 people—mostly parents and school staff.

After passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, two ways of listing schools on the academic warning or watch lists are being merged into one. The new way of listing schools is more stringent than the method used before the act.

"The old one is being done away with next year," said Jay Marino, assistant superintendent for instruction/school improvement.

According to standards in the No Child Left Behind Act, 40 percent of students in the Rock Island School District are now meeting or exceeding state standards. Under the previous system, 50 percent met standards, Mr. Marino said.

Grant school now is on the state academic watch list because the state says the school has not made "adequate yearly progress" in the past four years, based on Illinois Standards Achievement Tests. The progress "gives everybody a standard bar to reach, and it is raised every year," Mr. Marino said. "If it is not met, there are consequences."

Watch

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One consequence for not making "adequate yearly progress" for four years is to offer supplemental educational services, which the district must fund.

Another is to have a school improvement oversight panel appointed by the state superintendent. Grant will have such a panel this year, Grant Principal Darryl Taylor told the audience.

Schools not reaching the bar after four years also are expected to offer parents the choice to send students to a different school, with districts providing bus transportation from federal dollars.

However, Grant hasn't received federal transportation dollars because the state told school district officials in July 2002 that all of the schools in the district had made adequate yearly progress.

"We have an e-mail congratulating the district on this," Mr. Marino said.

But later, the Illinois School Board of Education, or ISBE, notified the school it did not achieve the required progress and remained on the list. Contacts with the state have not cleared up the matter, officials said.

Principal Taylor said the school has been working hard to make improvements and implement programs to help students strengthen their academic performance.

Using the America's Choice model of school improvement, he said, teachers are being trained every two months. Last year, they focused on teaching reading, and this year reading and writing.

"We have really excelled," Mr. Taylor said.

Tutoring continues when school is not in session. Classroom aides are brought in to reduce the student-teacher ratio in

each classroom.

Tutorial specialist Deborah Fowler said about 30 reading tutors and mentors come from Blackhawk State Bank to help students one-on-one during the school day. Education students from Western Illinois University volunteer to help, and retired seniors tutor the students as well.

Parents and teachers work together with kindergarten to first-grade students at the school's Learn and Family Fun Program, held once every two to three months, Mr. Taylor said.

Mr. Taylor said he and teachers at Grant work with the students intensively each day. "I'm in every classroom, every day, three to four times a day," he said. He challenged audience members to try to find a student who doesn't see him at least once a day.

"If not, please call Dr. Markward," he said.

A man in the audience who did not wish to give his name used to teach at Grant for more than 30 years. He said he was "irritated ... (because) it's like it's the staff's fault."

"It's a total community fault," he added.

Mr. Taylor noted many teachers must help meet the students' basic needs before they can hit the books. For example, some teachers must comb their students' hair and wash their faces. Some even take kids' laundry home to do. He said he has driven kids to doctor appointments on the weekends.

Bruce Bufe, director of reading and Title I programs, said that just as you wouldn't trust an EKG given by a doctor to determine your overall health, he believes a variety of tests should be given to test student improvement.

"I'd advocate a variety of tests for intellectual health," he said.

The three remaining meetings,

all at 7 p.m., will be held

■ Feb. 27 at Hawthorn Elementary School.

■ March 6 at Rock Island School.

■ March 13 at Edison High School.