

Text Paper

ET school systems reach for improvement

State Report Cards show challenges of higher standards

BY HUGH G. WILLETT

Most school districts in East Tennessee expected their 2009 Report Cards, released last week, to reflect the challenges of meeting higher state educational standards.

Few school districts in the state better reflect the hidden challenges of meeting those ever increasing standards than Oak Ridge.

Academic growth metrics that track performance increases over the previous year are especially tough for historically high-performing districts, according to Oak Ridge schools director Dr. Thomas Bailey.

"It gets harder and harder to show improvement," he said.

Oak Ridge scored straight A grades in academic achievement in the 2009 DOE report card, well above the state average. At more than 92 percent, the district's graduation rate also tops the state goal of 90 percent.

When the figures for academic growth and "value added" performance are revealed, however, it's another story. In grades K-8 the district's value added growth for the 2009 Report Card was less than zero in some cases.

"We've fallen back to Ds and Cs," Bailey said.

Bailey likens the challenge of reaching continually advancing goals to that of increasing an athlete's physical achievement.

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"Say you've got a basketball player making three out of 10 free throws. It's not that hard to get him up to five out of 10," he said. "The player making seven or eight out of 10, it's going to be harder to get him up to nine."

Federal standards such as the No Child Left Behind Act have also created challenges for even the best performing districts. The standards leave little room for any subgroup or minority to slip through, regardless of how well the rest of the students are performing.

"We have to look at the gaps and the deficiencies and go after those," Bailey said.

Blount County

Making good use of the massive amount of information generated by the state testing process is key to improvement, said Jane Morton, instructional supervisor and testing coordinator for Blount County Schools.

That district is placing more of an emphasis on benchmark and formative assessments that will provide an idea of how students are doing before they are tested.

"We're helping the teachers to make good use of the data to be able to drill down to individual students' needs," she said.

Blount County was generally pleased with the results of the recent

Report Card, Morton said.

The district scored mostly A and B grades in academic achievement. Like Oak Ridge, Blount County had a problem with academic growth. The K-8 subgroup value added score was a D in reading/language and science.

"We have pockets of excellence and pockets of need," she said.

A key area of focus is increasing the performance of middle to high achievers, she said.

The Blount County systemwide graduation rate of 86.2 percent was up four points from last year but was still below the state goal of 90 percent.

Blount County is also urging parents to become more involved in their children's education.

"It's important to understand that teachers cannot do all the work alone to make sure their students are academically proficient in math, reading and language arts," said Matt Murray, president of the Blount Education Initiative.

Sevier County

Value added growth also was a tough spot for Sevier County schools, according to Dr. Jack Parton, director of schools.

While academic achievement status received above average grades, the K-8's growth status was a C in reading/language arts. The value added scores in mathematics for grades 3-8 rated a D.

Parton, in a press release, stressed that the results of the latest tests reflected new standards and that the data collected would be used to

identify weak spots that can be addressed with new initiatives.

All students in grades one through eight will participate in Discovery Education benchmark assessments in reading, language arts and math. A new program called FASTT math is being implemented in elementary grades to increase math fluency.

Graduation rates for Sevier County actually dropped slightly from 87.6 percent in 2008 to 87.5 percent in 2009.

Loudon County

Jason Vance, Loudon County assistant schools director, said although the report card shows his system is meeting state standards in all areas, it was able to identify weaknesses in key areas such as math.

"It was a tough assessment, but it was an honest assessment," Vance said.

Academic achievement scores in the Loudon schools showed plenty of A and B grades, with the exception of a C in math. Value added scores for grades 3-8 were rated a D, with social studies and science rated a C.

The district has already moved to improve math scores with the implementation of Skillstutor—a package to help increase math fluency.

Vance said that the key to improvement will be found in breaking down the data to identify specific needs and to address those needs on an individual basis.

"We'll look at how specific schools performed in specific areas and identify successful schools so we can pick their brains and find out

how to pass that knowledge on to the less successful schools," he said.

Loudon County graduation rates dropped slightly from 88.5 percent in 2008 to 88.4 percent for 2009.

Jefferson County

Jefferson County schools received mixed blessings in the form of some above average, some average and some less than average achievement scores.

"The 2009 Report Card establishes a new benchmark for our district," said Connie Campbell, director of Jefferson County schools.

Grades 3-8 math and reading/language scores were rated a C, with social studies and science given a B. In grades 5-8 and 11, students earned A grades in writing.

"The change in the previous benchmark may appear as a decrease in student achievement; however, our stakeholders support the efforts of our teachers and understand the shift in reporting and its impact on report card scores," she said.

In academic growth scores, grades K-8 earned a B in math, reading/language and social studies, while science scores were rated a C.

"Our 2009 value added scores were above the state in every content area, which assures us that our students are making progress," Campbell said.

Graduation rates in Jefferson County increased from 85.4 percent in 2008 to 88.3 percent for 2009.

Hugh G. Willett is a freelance contributor to the News Sentinel.

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