

Three-fourths of New Mexico schools miss goals

Las Cruces Sun-News (NM) - Tuesday, August 3, 2010 Audience: 23,000 Byline: Christine Rogel / crogel@lcsun-news.com Section: News

LAS CRUCES — New Mexico students have made gains in math and reading during the past six years, but about three-fourths of schools missed the latest targets for boosting student achievement, the Public Education Department announced Monday.

The number of schools that didn't reach the goal of making "adequate yearly progress," or AYP, under the federal No Child Left Behind Act increased from last year, but state officials said that's because state-established student achievement targets were much higher this year.

According to the latest testing information, 644 schools, or 77.9 percent, didn't reach the goals for increasing student performance in New Mexico. That's up from 560 schools, or 68.2 percent, last year. The improvement objectives were met by 183 schools, or 22.1 percent. That compares with 261 schools, or 31.8 percent, last year.

In Las Cruces, three of 37 schools made AYP: Hillrise, Loma Heights and Mesilla Elementary schools.

Superintendent Stan Rounds said he is pleased with the three schools that made AYP and the district's math scores, as 23 of the 35 schools, or 66 percent, showed improvement in math.

"This year, I expected the number to diminish as the state's standard is escalating and the amount of gain we need is escalating very fast; it's more and more difficult for certain populations to make it," Rounds said.

Tracie O'Hara, director of the LCPS Accountability, Assessment and Research Department, attributed the gains in math to the implementation of a new math series that helps students learn critical thinking skills.

"Students are learning in that fashion where they are able to think out the problem, it's not all just computation anymore," O'Hara said.

Schools are evaluated mainly on student performance and participation in math and reading tests administered in grades three to eight and grade 11. Other factors in the ratings are graduation rates for high schools and attendance rates for elementary and middle schools.

Under the federal law, states are to increase their performance targets each year until 100 percent of students are proficient on tests by the 2013-2014 school year.

To make the progress goal this year, a school with kindergarten through the eighth grade needed 51 percent of its students to be at proficiency or above in math - up from 44 percent last year.

Sixty-four percent needed to meet the performance standard in reading, up from 60 percent last year.

"So it's those moving targets that can give a false sense to communities that schools are failing when, in essence, they are progressing in terms of growth," said New Mexico Education Secretary Susanna Murphy.

Murphy also said AYP is not the best tool for measuring school and student progress.

There's an upward trend in student performance, she said. In math, 42 percent of students statewide were at or above proficiency in 2009-2010 - up from 30 percent in 2004-2005. In reading, 53 percent of students were proficient or better - up from 50 percent in 2004-2005, but down from 55 percent last year.

Achievement in science has increased by 6 percentage points in the last six years, but those state tests are not used for the federal assessment of schools.

A school will not meet the adequate yearly progress goal if any one of several subgroups of students - black, white, Hispanic, American Indian, "economically disadvantaged" or poor, special education and students with limited English language skills - fail to meet performance or participation targets on tests.

There remains an "achievement gap" among ethnic and racial groups. White and Asian students typically fare better in tests than Hispanics, Indians and blacks. However, the department said Indian students had narrowed the gap in some areas, such as third grade math.

Overall, there are 37 indicators a school must meet to reach the yearly improvement goal. About 438 schools in New Mexico didn't reach the goal because they missed between one and three of those factors.

Loma Heights Elementary was one of just three Las Cruces schools that made AYP this year, after failing to do so for the past two years. Rudy Leos, principal at Loma Heights, said the school missed it last year by just a fraction of a percent in one subgroup, but he's glad to see his school back on track.

"Our trend the last five years has been of continued improvement," he said. Leos cites the staff's commitment to school programs, teamwork and one-on-one interaction with students.

Children at the elementary school get involved with setting their own learning goals - which keeps them invested in achieving them. When they're charting their own progress, and explaining it to their parents, the students understand the importance of what they're doing, he said.

Still, Leos said there's always room for improvement.

Though the AYP model has been criticized by educators, who say it doesn't paint an accurate picture of student success, Leos said the data provided for each school is very valuable in determining areas of strength and weakness.

"We look at all the data, look at where our areas of continued growth are, and see what we can incorporate into areas that we haven't done quite as well," he said.

In Las Cruces, five schools missed the AYP mark this year because by one to three of these factors: Alma d'arte Charter High School, Booker T.

Washington, Desert Hills Elementary, Mesilla Park Elementary and White Sands Elementary.

In Hatch Valley Public Schools, one of five schools met AYP, Garfield Elementary School. This was the second consecutive year the school succeeded in meeting the requirement, ending its designation of In Need of Improvement.

Garfield's principal, Richard Marquez, attributes the success to a curriculum that focuses on research-based strategies and hardworking educators. He also said that parental support and a tight-knit community helped many students' performance.

"(Parents) set a time and area where kids can do their homework. They provide that support at home and make sure we are getting back the things we're asking for," Marquez said.

In the Gadsden Independent School District, there were three schools - Desert View, Sunland Park and Santa Teresa - out of 21 district-wide that met the requirement.

Barry Massey of the Associated Press and Sun-News reporter Amanda L. Bradford contributed to this report.

Christine Rogel can be reached at (575) 541-5424.

AYP Quick Facts

- The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires all schools to meet academic benchmarks by 2014.
- It mandates all students will perform at 100 percent proficiency levels in reading and math by 2014.
- All schools must show continued improvement every year.
- Grades 3 through 8, and grade 11 are tested in the spring to measure Annual Yearly Progress. • States may set their own rate of growth and their own academic benchmarks.

- There are 37 criteria schools must meet. If one is missed, that school does not meet AYP .
- Schools that consistently fail to meet AYP are placed on corrective action.
- Three LCPS schools made AYP this year: Hillrise, Loma Heights, and Mesilla elementary schools.

Record Number: 15665218

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