

State test results sink for 5th straight year in District 189

BY MARIA BARAN AND GEORGE PAWLACZYK - News-Democrat

Historically low state test results for high school students in East St. Louis School District 189 have sunk for the fifth straight year, according to preliminary data contained in the 2010 Adequate Yearly Progress Report from the Illinois State Board of Education.

The latest results show that 10.75 percent of tested high school students met or exceeded state minimum standards for reading and mathematics. Scores have dropped every year since 2005, when 16.85 percent of the district's high school students met or exceeded standards. The rate last year was 12.4 percent.

The district, where more than 90 percent of the approximately 7,500 students come from homes below the poverty level, remains on the state Academic Watch list for the ninth straight year. During those years, the district has spent Title I and Title II federal funding ranging from about \$7 million to \$10 million per year on speakers, teacher and administrator workshops and travel, consultants, computer software and after school tutoring to help raise lagging scores.

While top school district leaders would not comment, a spokesman for the State Board of Education said these scores should not be tolerated and are likely to lead to intervention.

Under a pilot program, the district may receive the guidance of an outside "lead partner organization" to help with reform including hiring, assigning teachers and professional development, according to a written statement from Illinois State Board of Education spokesman Matt Vanover. The nature or identity of such a "lead partner organization" and how this would be funded was not available.

And, if that program fails to materialize, District 189, "would likely be forced by direct state intervention into implementing the same type of reforms," Vanover said.

District 189 Superintendent Theresa Saunders could not be reached for comment and did not respond to written questions. School board President Lonzo Greenwood did not respond to a voice mail message seeking comment.

Preliminary minimum standard percentages are routinely released only to district administrators in the months before they are made public. Despite District 189's failure to respond to a request to examine the preliminary data, the News-Democrat obtained a copy.

The percentages of East St. Louis Senior High School students who met or exceeded minimum standards -- 15.1 percent in reading and 6.4 percent in math -- may change when district report cards are released statewide, probably sometime in October, according to Vanover. The average of these figures produced the 10.75 average percentage.

"The percentages are unacceptable, and while there are many factors that impact student success outside the classroom, including poverty, exposure to substance abuse, violence or delinquency to name a few, improvement can be made and should be expected," Vanover said in a written response. He stated that the school board must ensure that changes to improve education are made and the public needs to get involved.

But in District 189, where school board meetings routinely involve closed executive sessions that range from one to two hours, and many residents report being treated rudely when they call the district offices, public involvement is often limited.

Lucille Robinson said a few days ago that she was treated rudely when she telephoned the district seeking information about whether her granddaughter's kindergarten class had been canceled. On Saturday, Robinson said she was attempting to transfer her granddaughter to any other school district, "as long as it's not East St. Louis."

As for trying to get information from the district, she said: "They won't give you information. They are very snappy. Or they say we don't know. They pass you around. You don't get any good response."

Katrice Ballard-Glass, who said she recently transferred her daughter out of District 189, said she too was rudely treated when calling the district about the same kindergarten class and on other occasions.

Ballard-Glass, a 1997 graduate of the former Lincoln High School in District 189, said she was a top student but was nevertheless unprepared when she started classes in the fall at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

"The classes I took in high school, it was not college prep, it was (just to) meet the standardized testing skills in high school. That's what we got. I was not prepared," said Ballard-Glass, who graduated from Mizzou with a degree in sociology in 2001.

"It wasn't hard for me to understand the (college) math. It was the simple thing of why wasn't I taught this in high school? It wasn't that I didn't understand it. It was that I had never seen it before. ... I had good teachers in high school. The problem was the curriculum."

The solution to improving the ability of high school students to meet or exceed state standards must begin in the lower grades even in kindergarten, said William Tate,

professor and chairman of the education department at Washington University, St. Louis.

He said the state data only reveals that the percentages are declining, not why.

"You don't know where the glitches are in the system." Tate said. "There is no way to tell. They're not following kids over time. All you know from this test is that each individual year the scores have go down. ... That's why you need to track kids over time to find out where in the system that they may be actually gaining and where they may be actually falling back."

The 2010 percentage of students meeting math minimum standards is down more than 3 percentage points since last year to a level that could make it difficult to function even when a low level of math ability is needed.

"My heart just sank," said Mike Shaughnessy, president of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, when told about the District 189 percentage for math. "I don't have any magic bullets for the school district or the teachers. Because it's just a difficult problem that needs a long-term, concentrated effort."

Shaughnessy called it "innumeracy," the failure to understand basic math skills. "It's systematic to our national culture, that folks feel that it's OK to not be any good at math."

Because of the growth of technology jobs, "it's much more important than ever to be competent in math."

"Being able to reason with percentages in all situations is absolutely critical -- proportional reasoning. That sort of stuff is all over in our everyday life. That's the kind of thing that students do get behind on, early on. Conceptually, it's a little tougher than add, subtract, multiply and divide."

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