

N.J. school report card results

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By HERALD STAFF

With scores at or near the top of the annual state school report cards in the region, Stillwater could be considered a star.

But district Superintendent S. William Shelton said it's unfair to compare district to district, even within the same county or region.

On Thursday, the state Department of Education released its annual report card of schools, rating them in areas from the number of computers in a school to the number of students and how well they did on tests. The reports also examine faculty-to-student ratios and district expenses.

"We have a very stable community," Shelton said, meaning most students who start kindergarten graduate from sixth grade in Stillwater. "Turnover is very low and that gives us a continuity. We know the educational background of the kids. These aren't the same conditions found in every town."

Shelton said getting all students to score "proficient" on all the tests "is certainly a lofty goal" but he said some aspects of the national No Child Left Behind program are "getting too numbers-oriented."

He said the faculty does spend more time teaching towards the tests, but he said the teachers have found ways to work those areas into the normal curriculum. "I don't know if the overall education suffers" from the higher emphasis," he said.

Just for the numbers, all of Stillwater's third graders last year passed the language and math tests and with total class sizes of under 60, if two children didn't do well on a test, the "fail" rate would be 3.5.

Even the worst score — sixth- grade language, at which 12.5 percent "failed" — the number is actually just six of the 48 students in the class.

Shelton said the district offers after-school classes for all students, not just those who need help, and summer school also takes in about 100 kids each year and is open to everybody.

"Those who need help are getting it, and it helps some students to not regress over the summer," he explained.

Stillwater works with the neighboring districts of Fredon, Sandyston-Walpack and Hamp-ton to coordinate their teaching methods. All schools are K-6 programs and feed their graduates into the Kittatinny Regional school, which has grades 7 to 12.

That coordination began about 10 years ago and involves not only the elementary school teachers, but also Kittatinny teachers, in the curriculum study teams.

The superintendent said, "There's nothing (in the report card) that I worry about when it comes to the numbers," but then he noted the district's per-pupil costs number "is on the higher end of average. Of course, when you're talking about a small school with small class sizes, those costs will be up."

Following are snapshots of some Sussex County districts representing the range of scores reported.

Hamburg: Addressing low scores

Realizing a need for improvement, Hamburg School District is utilizing new programs to boost future scores.

"We're certainly never content when children don't perform well," said Hamburg Superintendent Steven Engravalle.

He said the district is doing several things to address the situation. Third- through fifth-grade students are being homogeneously grouped in language and math classes to give those who need it additional time and attention.

"No one is ever happy with coming in lower than what was expected," he said.

A new Harcourt math curriculum also has been put into place, Engravalle said: "What better publisher to use than the one the state is going to use for assessment?"

Hamburg schools are also the first in the county to implement Harcourt's Learnia program for grades 5 through 8 during the 2007-2008 school year.

The program is designed to help teachers know how to focus and refine their instruction so that student who need help get the instruction they need, and students who have mastered the material can move on to new and more stimulating material.

Engravalle said teachers have been going through the Learnia program to pull out questions so that students become accustomed to the way the tests are worded to give them an advantage when taking the tests.

The teachers teach what is tested, he said.

"I make no excuses. We need to work harder, and we're going to work harder, smarter," he said.

Lafayette:

High scores even in change

Students at the Lafayette Township School consistently are producing some of the best test results in Sussex County, even in the midst of a change in administrators.

Lafayette's performance on state tests shows the lowest percentage of students earning "partial proficiency" or below standard scores on standardized tests at several grade levels, and the highest scaled score on the tests in several subjects.

Interim Superintendent and Principal Robert McCann said the test results were encouraging.

"They're outstanding scores ... I'm very happy with the scores," he said. "We have a hard-working staff here, and hard work pays off."

The district's results did show drawbacks in math and science, particularly in the fifth and sixth grades. But the interim superintendent said the results could be just a matter of numbers and chance.

"That could be an anomaly that shows up on the radar screen," McCann said. "In every school, you're going to have that."

"Testing sometimes is only good on the day it's taken," he added.

Nevertheless, McCann said the scores would be analyzed, and the subjects with the lower performance would be a curriculum focus prior to future testing.

McCann took over the leadership of the district after Craig Hutchinson left for the Kittatinny district.

However, McCann says his job as interim leader is just to pave the way for the continued successes for Keith Neuhs, who is scheduled to take over the district on April 1. McCann said he wants to connect the past successes to those of the future.

"The credit really goes to the faculty, and to Mr. Hutchinson, who left in September," McCann said.

Sandyston:

After-school support

Sandyston-Walpack superintendent Glenn Sumpman said Sandyston-Walpack can thank its dedicated and experienced staff for the district's superior math and science scores.

"I believe we provide good support for our students and for those students who need additional help, we provide basic skills teachers," Sumpman said.

Last year, taxpayers voted to approve a program that provides after-school support to students who need extra help in their studies.

Basic skills teachers tutor three to six students at a time.

This year, the school will be implementing a new "hands-on science curriculum."

"We've increased our instructional time for science and social studies because we felt that the program we had needed to be updated. We want something hands-on that will have a good content base as well," Sumpman said.

Another of the school's goals this year will be to improve students' proficiency scores in language arts.

Although students did well on the annual report card, Sumpman said, the district felt that students needed more work on "making inferences and drawing conclusions" from their reading.

Sumpman said the school has worked with consultants to analyze test results and to identify areas in which students need extra help, and focus on increasing students' advanced proficiency levels.